

8 Pentecost, Proper 10, Yr. C
July 10, 2016
Luke 10:25-37

If I have a usual pattern, it's to begin with scriptural analysis and end with a story illustrating the points I'm trying to make. But today I want to reverse that process and begin with a story that appeared a couple of days ago. The headline was "Jewish Settlers Attacked, Needed Help. A Palestinian Doctor Didn't Hesitate." (NYT 7-6-16) Like the story we just heard Jesus tell, this one took place on a road in the West Bank in Israel, a contested region, populated by both Palestinians and Israelis, including any number of Jewish settlers who are living there to make a claim to the land that they say is biblically theirs. As you know, the tensions between the Palestinians and the settlers are high, with kidnappings and murders part of daily life. The Palestinian doctor in the headline was a urologist named Ali Shroukh. He was traveling with his brothers to Jerusalem to pray at the mosque there, to commemorate the end of Ramadan. They came upon a car that had flipped over onto its roof. It was a big, boxy model, able to carry lots of children and therefore easily identifiable as belonging to a Jewish settler. The car had crashed after a Palestinian gunman had killed the father, who was driving the car. Inside were the wife, who was critically injured and two children, one of whom was seriously wounded. The doctor and his brothers stopped, flagged down by another Palestinian man who had put the girl in their car while they waited for medics to arrive. Dr. Shroukh tended to the girl and then he and his brother smashed the car window to extract the mother. And then, the news account said, reality set in. A Palestinian medic who had arrived advised the brothers to leave. This was an attack, he told them, not an accident. and the doctor could be arrested by Israeli soldiers who might suspect him of being an accomplice because he was not dressed as a doctor and was, at that point, covered in blood. After being sure the injured were stable, the doctor and his brothers left. Later, he said he thought it was his duty to help even if was at risk. "It doesn't matter if somebody is a settler, a Jew or an Arab," he said. "Thank God we helped them."

There it is – the modern day version of Jesus' parable. This parable of the Good Samaritan is one that's familiar to most people, whether church-goers or not. And it poses questions as relevant and as central today as when Jesus told it 2000 plus years ago. I think one good way to address the reading is to look at the three major characters: the lawyer (who is actually a scripture scholar), the Jewish traveler and the Samaritan.

First the lawyer. He knows the law in question as we can tell from the conversation he and Jesus have. The law: Love God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself. They both agree that this is the summary of the entire law. But then there's the next question, which the text says is the lawyer wanting to justify himself, but maybe he just wants the last word or maybe he wants to have Jesus lay it out in black and white: OK, I'll love my neighbor, but how far does that have to go? In that society, there were many Romans and Greeks, to say nothing of the hated Samaritans and some Rabbis taught that the "neighbor" only included fellow Jews. Some taught that it couldn't include personal enemies; others taught that it couldn't include anyone outside the law. So, I think we could argue that it's a legitimate question. Frederick Buechner has suggested that what the lawyer would have liked would be something like this:

“A neighbor (hereinafter referred to as the party of the first part) is to be construed as meaning a person of Jewish descent whose legal residence is within a radius of no more than three statute miles from one’s own legal residence unless there is another person of Jewish descent (hereinafter referred to as the party of the second part) living closer to the party of the first part than one is oneself, in which case the party of the second part is to be construed as neighbor to the party of the first part and one is oneself relieved of all responsibility of any sort or kind whatsoever.” (*Wishful Thinking*)

And while we might chuckle at that, I think we’d all like that kind of answer because it tells us just how far we have to go, tells us when we’ve done enough, when we can quit.

But, as you know, that’s not the answer Jesus gives. Instead, he tells the story of the man beaten by robbers and left half-dead by the side of the road and of the two people who walked by – the priest and the Levite – who crossed the road and no doubt quickened their pace. Their behavior is sometimes explained, if not excused, by the fact that they would have run the risk of being ritually impure by touching the man if he was dead, or that they figured that they’d be risking their lives if the robbers were lurking nearby. But then there’s the one who stopped, the Samaritan. You probably know that he was in alien territory and that the Jews and Samaritans had hated each other for centuries. Part of the hatred had to do with the fact that the Samaritans had their own temple, at Mt. Gerizim, and didn’t recognize the one in Jerusalem. The Jews, from their side, saw the Samaritans as half-breeds, as unfaithful to the law of Moses. For Jews, there was no such thing as a good Samaritan – at the time, the only good Samaritan would have been a dead Samaritan. But the Samaritan stops and cares for the Jewish man. Why? It’s a good question, isn’t it? But like the Palestinian doctor, he found himself confronted by an urgent need and with no one else to deal with it, he simply does what kindness, one could even say what humanity, requires. In the face of the need, all creedal and racial differences vanished. All that mattered to the Samaritan was the need of the victim.

Then there’s the victim himself. It’s probably a sure thing that at this moment in his life nothing matters to him but getting help – theology and ancient hatreds don’t mean a thing. What does he want? Only a rescuer. Does he care if that person is a Samaritan? Not one bit. And, don’t you think that after this encounter, he will forever view Samaritans differently? See them as fellow humans and not as enemies? And he’ll probably view victims differently, too, having had that experience himself. Don’t you think he’ll be less callous? Less inclined to lay blame? Less likely to pass someone by? Amy Jill-Levine, who is a Jewish/Christian scholar, asks this question: If you’re the one in the ditch, is there ANYONE, from any group, that you’d prefer to die rather than accept their help? To really get Jesus’ story and to understand its full impact and why it stuck in the throats of his listeners, we’d have to really understand the news story I started with, or perhaps imagine that it’s an American in the ditch and a member of Hamas stopped (or vice versa).

This text is full of questions – beginning with those between Jesus and the lawyer, but ultimately for us. Perhaps the first question that pops out at us, if we think this may apply to us, is something like: WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO ME IF I STOP, or IF I HELP? And then, not far behind, come all the reasons we shouldn’t stop, like:

- Look at that guy; it's his own fault; he should have known this road was dangerous!
- I don't think I'll stop because I don't have the skills needed to help;
- I don't have my cell phone with me and someone else has probably already phoned it in;
- You know, the way the laws are today, I might get sued;
- I have an important meeting to get to; someone else will take care of this;
- This isn't my problem; this is why I pay all those taxes!

But Martin Luther King, in a sermon on this text, says that asking ourselves what will happen to ME if I stop is the wrong question. The question he says we should be asking is WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THE PERSON IN THE DITCH IF I DON'T STOP? But I think there's an even deeper, more important question for us this morning and that's WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO ME IF I DON'T STOP? What will become of my heart and my humanity and my desire to live as a witness of God's love?

This is a timeless story about what it means to be a human being, called to live as an image of God on this earth; called, as Paul says, to lead a life worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God. That's God invitation to us; God's plan for us. This text can be read literally, with someone in physical distress needing rescue. But it can also be read metaphorically – for all the ways in which people can be “in the ditch” – because of poverty, or prejudice or oppression. And it's God's plan that they be “rescued” and healed.

But we well know there are other voices, voices of fear and anger and hatred, voices that argue that only SOME lives matter. We're surrounded these days by those voices that urge us to hatred and violence; that tell us that kindness and compassion are a fools' game. But Christ's message is a different one. LOVE, he says. In the face of fear and hatred, simply love. Hard? Yes. Sometimes scary? Perhaps. Challenging? Always.

Elie Wiesel died this past week. As you probably know, he was Jewish and was taken with his family to a concentration camp when he was 14. He survived and spent his life teaching and writing against forgetting what hatred and violence can do. His message was one of peace, atonement and human dignity. The Nobel Prize he received carried a citation that read: His belief that the forces fighting against evil in the world can be victorious is a hard-won belief.

That the forces of kindness, compassion, mercy and love that are fighting evil and hatred and bigotry and selfishness can be victorious...it's Christ's message too.

Amen.