

5 Pentecost, Proper 10, Yr. C

July 14, 2019

Deuteronomy 30:9-14, Luke 10:25-37

Someone who tests these things said that a majority of people who attend church regularly, 69% of those asked, said that they knew the story of the Good Samaritan. I don't know if the interviewer followed through and asked them to tell the story or not. But if they did, I'm guessing that most of them, like us, would see the story as a simple ethical tale – that we should be good to people in need. Nobody is going to argue against that interpretation. But, as always, with Jesus' parables, it goes deeper than that.

I'm sure you know that the Jews and the Samaritans hated each other. It was a long-standing hatred. When the northern kingdom of Israel had been defeated by the Assyrians, the conquerors took most of the leadership into exile. Those who were left were considered unimportant. Since then, they had intermarried with other races. They were considered "half-breeds" by the other Jews, who thought that they had polluted the true religion by worshipping on Mt. Gerizim rather than Jerusalem and because they differed in their interpretation of the Torah. So for the lawyer who tests Jesus in the Gospel, the words "good" and "Samaritan" would never have gone together. That would have been a total oxymoron. But the Samaritans gave as good as they got. Sometime before Jesus would have been telling this parable, some Samaritans had gone into the Temple in Jerusalem and scattered human bones around, thereby desecrating the space. So, you get the picture, not only is there no love lost between the two groups, there was an intense hatred. In fact, you'll remember a couple of weeks ago, when Jesus was going through Samaria and some of the villages rejected him, that James and John suggested that Jesus bring fire down upon them. Jesus, of course, declined. So that's the setting.

We see a lawyer, actually a Scripture scholar, engaging Jesus is the question about eternal life. The text says that he was testing Jesus, but maybe he was sincere. In any event, Jesus turns the question back to the

man's area of expertise. What's in the law? Easy, peasy, thinks the lawyer – love God and love your neighbor as yourself.

It's interesting here to look back at that reading from Deuteronomy which says that those commandments are themselves accessible – you don't have to go up to heaven to find them, or beyond the sea. No, says the writer- that word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart. So again, easy – it all goes back to that basic command of LOVE.

At the Bible class on Thursday, it was pointed out that while many a sermon might exhort us to love, every person hearing those sermons probably has his or her idea of what love means. I know that I have said before that, at least in this country, where we are bombarded with tales of romance, that might well be what we think of first when we think of love. And then, if we move beyond that, we might think of having warm, fuzzy feelings about someone, or something. But while those are certainly true and certainly fine, the love that the scriptures are talking about is love in the sense of righteousness and duty and responsibility. I've come to define love then, as the recognition of connection and the responsibility to act out of that connection. And if we remember that we are connected to everyone and everything on the earth, that makes love an over-arching and ever-present command. And while it may be easy to articulate it, as the lawyer did, it's often very difficult to live out.

So that's the first part of the conversation. But then comes the next question: who is my neighbor anyway?. Why that question do you think? Some think he was trying to vindicate himself, because he didn't want to be seen as asking a trivial question. But it could very well be that it was a serious question, having to do with wanting to set some limits: my neighbor is a fellow Jew and that's as far as I have to go. And, indeed, some Rabbis taught that.

But instead of answering directly Jesus tells this story. So we have the half-dead Jewish trader lying in the ditch, his co-religionists who for one reason or another, passing him by and then, finally, a rescuer. Now, I'm guessing that the fellow in the ditch, even if he had been capable of

opening one eye and seeing that the person helping him was a Samaritan, wouldn't have raised an objection. One commentator asks this question of us: Can you recognize and accept the hated Samaritan as your neighbor? If not, you might be left for dead. So, while the lawyer was looking to narrow the definition of those he needed to help, Jesus was doing the very opposite – expanding it. They had opposing visions. For the lawyer, God's chosen people were the Jews; for Jesus, everyone fell into that category. So, not just helping someone in need, but going beyond all the categories of separation and enmity to help. It was the need of a fellow human that mattered. This was a big shock for the lawyer. You'll note from the text that when Jesus asks him who was the neighbor to the injured man, he can't bring himself to say "the Samaritan" – he just says "the one who showed mercy."

It's an interesting story, but one that we may be tempted to gloss over quickly because we've heard it so often. And the Jew/Samaritan hatred is pretty remote for us as well. What if the story had to do with a Christian in the ditch and a couple of priests and ministers passing by and then a Muslim giving aid? That's how those first listeners might have heard the story – it was pretty shocking.

Like the lawyer, we can find the story pretty shocking and be tempted to find ways to avoid dealing with it. Here's with a touch of humor is another telling of the story that reflects, I think, our own resistance.

"A man fell into a pit and couldn't get out. A subjective person came along and said, "I feel for you down there." An objective person came and said, "It's logical that someone would fall down there." A Pharisee said, "Only bad people fall into pits." A fundamentalist said, "You undoubtedly deserve your pit." An IRS agent asked if he was paying taxes on the pit. A narcissist said, "You haven't seen anything until you've seen MY pit." But Jesus, seeing the man, took him by the hand and lifted him out of the pit. And that's what we're asked to do.

But as demanding as this all seems, there are people who are able to bridge difference, see common humanity, see connection and act in

response. One such story I read is about a bus in Kenya that was stopped by a terrorist group, looking to kill Christians. In this case, a group of Kenyan Muslims shielded the Christian passengers, giving the Christian women their hijabs, helping others hide beyond bags in the bus and finally telling the attackers, "If you want to kill us, then kill us. There are no Christians here." (Synthesis 2016)

Closer to home, though, is a story that at this moment is unresolved. It involves a young man being retried for helping migrants in the AZ desert. He belongs to a group called No More Deaths, which apparently began by finding and trying to identify bodies in the desert. Maybe finding bodies like that radicalizes a person and brings all this home in a more powerful way, because the group started to leave food and water along routes that they identified. He has been charged with harboring migrants illegally and with trespassing and littering federal lands. He said, however, that "whatever happens at my trial, the next day, someone will walk out of the desert and knock on someone's door...if they are thirsty, we will offer them water. We will not ask for documents beforehand."

It was quite a long time ago when I preached about that community in Vichy France that Jews trying to escape the Nazis were passing through. Madame Trocme, the wife of the Protestant pastor there, was the subject of a book about the community. The story is that the first refugee knocked on her door. When she opened it, Madame saw a young Jewish woman, thin and shivering in the cold and asking for food and shelter. And what struck me most when I first read the story and has stayed with me since is her simple reply, BUT OF COURSE. Of course, in spite of the danger, in spite of the possible cost. Of course, because of the need of a fellow human to whom she knew she was connected and for whom she knew she was responsible.

And for us, who is the neighbor who appears before us, who asks for help, who is crying out to hear that simple OF COURSE. And how will we respond? Amen.

