

## ***A sermon preached on July 14<sup>th</sup>, 2019 based upon Luke 10:25-37***

As Jesus is heading to Jerusalem where he will lay down his life for all people, much like we heard James and John do in the passage from confirmation Sunday, a man comes to Jesus to ask a question that sounds “spiritual” but is ultimately all about the man himself. A scholar of the laws of the Torah, the question he asks is “*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*” Unlike the question, “*What can I do to help my community?*” the question this man asks isolates him from others. It also assumes “eternal life” is something a person can achieve.

Jesus isn’t interested in being peoples’ answer man, and so as is often the case, he turns the question back on the man. “*You’re a lawyer. What does your reading of the good book tell you?*” The man gives what is actually a pretty enlightened answer, drawing two laws together from different parts of the Torah: “*You shall love the Lord your 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.*” Jesus commends the answer. “*Do this,*” he says, “*and you will live.*”

But the man isn’t finished, and indicating that he is still very much trapped inside himself (“*seeking to justify himself*”) as well as stuck in his head, determined to see life as an intellectual exercise to resolve, he asks, “*And who is my neighbor.*”

The first thing I’d like to say is that on one level this is a very legitimate question – one with which all of us struggle. It is the question of setting boundaries. Knowing we have limited energy and resources – the question of how far our responsibility extends is very real. Am I obliged to help the immigrants imprisoned at the border, some of whom are living in conditions more commonly associated with caged animals? Or closer to home, am I responsible to help the person I know who is losing their home, or their job? How about the person who is lonely and needs a friend? If we tried to help everybody we’d soon be no good to anybody. Even Jesus, I would argue struggle over the question of setting boundaries. In the Gospels we hear about instances where he would withdraw -- or at least try to withdraw -- from the crowds of people with all their need for help for times of rest and renewal.

As Jesus often did, he proceeds to tell a story, because stories invite us to get out of our head and into our hearts. The story, I would argue doesn’t resolve the question of where we are to set our boundaries – if anything, it invites us to a life time of struggling with the question.

On one level the story seems pretty straight forward with the moral of the story being the impossible demand to help everyone you meet who is in need. But the story isn’t a simple moral example story; it’s a parable and the very nature of a parable is that it invites us to climb inside the story and wrestle with it. In particular, parables typically

always include surprises, and the surprises are the places where the wrestling takes place.

So in this story a man traveling on the road to Jericho gets beaten by robbers and left half dead at the side of the road. No surprise here. The road to Jericho was notorious in those days as a setting for thugs to attack and take your money. And variations of such attacks are all too familiar in our world as well.

The first surprise comes when two men come by and don't stop who you might expect to stop and help. They are both devout Jews and the man in the gutter is a Jew. Why don't they stop? Jesus doesn't tell us so we are left to speculate.

Two possibilities come to mind, both of which are easy to identify with. First, they are in a hurry. They have important responsibilities to carry out in the Temple and stopping will keep them from getting there on time. For them there is the added twist that if the man is in fact dead, coming in contact with him will leave them ritually unclean and unable for the immediate future of carrying out their Temple responsibilities.

The pressure of feeling hurried by many responsibilities is one with which we're all familiar. We lose the present moment because of our anxiety to get to the future. Our perception of what truly matters gets distorted. The story invites us to reflect on how this happens in our lives.

The second possibility of why they don't stop is that they are afraid. Perhaps the robbers are close at hand, waiting to jump them if they stop. And who among us can't acknowledge how fearful this world can make us sometimes?

The second, and perhaps greater surprise is what happens next. A Samaritan comes traveling down the road. Samaritans and Jews are enemies. Under normal conditions a Jew and a Samaritan wouldn't speak to each other at best, and actively seek to harm one another at worst. To get a feel for the level of hostility and suspicion perhaps we should picture a member of al-Qaeda coming down the road.

And the great surprise – miraculous really – the Samaritan stops and helps the man, overcoming not only his personal pressures of hurry and fear, but also the ancient hatred between their peoples. The man puts himself out to help, generously expending his time, attention and money.

For me, the key verse is this one that describes the Samaritan's initial response to the man lying in the gutter: He "*came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with compassion.*" The first two men aren't described as *coming near him*, nor really *seeing* him, let alone being moved with compassion. It's the Samaritan's willingness to *come near* and to *really see the man* that naturally leads to his heart going out to the man.

But still there is a mystery as to what it was that made it possible for the Samaritan to come near, this man to truly see, and therefore to have compassion.

You know the saying I quote often: *“Be kind; everybody you meet is fighting a great battle.”* Beneath the surface, there are struggles in every person we meet, whether past or present, of which we have no clue. One of my core beliefs is that if you had the opportunity to truly listen to any other person honestly share their story – the real story without the veneer – not only the good stuff but also the story of their wounds and sorrows, you could not help but have your heart go out to them – you could not help but find them worthy of your love.

In part this conviction comes from the fact that as a pastor I am given the holy opportunity to hear peoples’ stories more often than most people. In my first church there were two women who were Sunday School teachers who had some kind of conflict between them, and an intense dislike each had for the other. I can’t remember the conflict – it wasn’t anything significant. My suspicion is that they both saw something in the other that they didn’t want to look at in themselves.

Both of these women had individually shared with me something of the story of their lives, and I knew for a fact that they shared far more in common than they knew. One woman had spent her whole life suffering under an alcoholic, abusive father. The other woman had shared with me that her father had murdered her mother and then taken his own life.

If these two women could have found the courage to open up to one another share their stories, I knew they would have tearfully collapsed into the arms of one another in the recognition they had found a sister.

But not having this opportunity, they were locked instead in their hatred for one another.

On Confirmation Sunday I talked about the reality of the soul and the possibility of losing it. The soul is the deepest part of ourselves – the part out of which compassion arises. The question of finding the opportunity to truly draw near and see one another in order that we might experience compassion involves the very health of our souls.

The truth that Christianity has always affirmed and the lawyer did not understand is that the only way such an opening of the heart can occur is through grace -- the mystery of God’s love given to us as gift, not as achievement. It was that power of which the former slave owner John Newton sang in his most famous of all hymns – “Amazing Grace” – the power which allowed him to see the African slaves as human beings and to feel the pain he had been a part of inflicting.

Grace allows us to see ourselves in the man in the ditch.

I read about this Princeton professor who studied why it was some people acted generously and compassionately where others didn't. In interviewing such people, he found they would commonly share some story regarding having been the recipient of compassion themselves – an experience of embodied grace.

He told the story of a man named Jack Casey, who worked on a rescue squad. Jack's home life was one that could only be described as rough. He had an alcoholic, abusive father. *"All my father taught me is that I didn't want to grow up to be like him."* One day a youth Jack had an experience that touched something very deep inside him. He was in a hospital preparing to undergo surgery, and he was terrified. A surgical nurse stood beside him and compassionately reassured him: *"Don't worry,"* she said to Jack. *"I'll be here right beside you no matter what happens. When Jack woke up after the surgery, there she was, true to her word."*

Years later Jack was working as a paramedic. A man flipped over his truck and was pinned under it on the highway. Injured and very frightened, the man cried out that he was afraid of dying. Jack climbed under the flipped truck to be there with the man. Gasoline was dripping down onto both of them, and rescue workers were using power tools to try and cut the metal to free the man. There was a very real danger that everything could go up in flames simply by a spark from the power tools. Jack remembered what the surgical nurse had said to him long ago. *"Look, don't worry,"* Jack said to the frightened man, *"I'm right here with you, I'm not going anywhere."*

Days later, the rescued truck driver said to Jack, *"You know, you were an idiot, the thing could have exploded and we'd both have been burned up!"*

"I just couldn't leave you," Jack said.

Some translations of our story use the word "pity" to describe the response of the Samaritan to the man at the side of the road; others "compassion." If you look up the dictionary definitions of the two words they are essentially the same. But I asked Bob to use the word "compassion" because in common parlance the two words have come to mean different things. Pity suggests something condescending: reaching down to help the pitiful person. The root meaning of "com – passion" is "with suffering" – to be *with* another in their suffering – to feel the other's pain inside your own body. It implies that we're in this together.

I've shared my story before, how as young adult I went into the ministry for a variety of reasons, but one was that I viewed a pastor as being a strong person that weak, broken people leaned on for strength. Though that wasn't who I was, that's what I wanted to be. My parents had gotten divorced when I was child, and I carried inside

me my own wounds – I was engaged in my own great battle – but I wanted to flee from my wounds by playing the part of the strong pastor who takes pity on others.

And then a couple of years into my ministry I entered in ill-advised marriage which quickly broke apart. I imagined that in announcing publicly that my marriage was ending in divorce, I would be disqualifying myself to continue as a pastor.

But to my great surprise my congregation responded with compassion, not judgment. They embodied grace. I realized that we are all in this together – each fighting a great battle. Ever since, this has been the defining theme of my ministry.

Jesus' parable invites us to see ourselves not only in three travelers on the road, but also in the man in the ditch. Jesus comes to us in the ditch, and in doing so strangely warms our hearts with grace, allowing us to escape the lonely prison cell of our egos and to experience compassion for all the other travelers with us on the road of life.