

Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity Gal. 3: 16-22

Luke 10: 23-37

+In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Amen+

In reflecting back over his life, Karl Barth, the famous Swiss Reformed theologian tells the story of an encounter he had with a young man who was obviously a great fan. The good professor was after all one of the most famous and beloved religious figures of his time. One day Barth received a letter from this new pastor. The writer told him how much his works had meant and the powerful influence his thoughts had made on his parish work. Toward the end of the note there was a request included. This person asked if Barth would send him signed copies of his most important and significant works. Now this was quite a summons, because as any seminary student is aware, Barth was the author of a set of books known as the Church Dogmatics. In fact the publisher, T & T Clark, had printed them in multiple volume sets numbering well over 12, each being hundreds of pages in length. It would be like asking for copies of the autobiographies of everyone here today!! Barth considered the request for some time wondering how he might respond. Some weeks later a package arrived on the pastor's desk. When he opened it he took out a signed document. It was a picture of Barth's family, with the inscription, "**These** are my most **important** works". The receiver of this letter said that it was the most profound lesson of his life.

This story is indicative of an essential living reality. Namely, that what circumscribes and sets the most vital life giving boundaries of our lives are the relationships we are given the opportunity to nurture and be nurtured by. Fame, large or small; accomplishments, menial or great; careers, engaging or routine; all of these are measured over and against our relationships, first with God and then with our neighbor. That relationship with God always hangs in the background of our intentions and our actions. What we "do" in this sojourn is intimately related to who we "are" as we connect with the others in our spheres of living. The inner qualities of our hearts and minds, the ways in which we see through our families and neighbors to the depth of their real need will impact what we do in the face of those needs.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan is a story of invitation. Terribly familiar and often heard it is also too often trivialized into a morality play or a story like Aesop's Fables which have with a neatly packaged moral at the end. You know what I mean—be good and nice to everyone because it is a virtuous thing to do. And no doubt the world would be a better or at least more pleasant place if we endeavored to do so. But this parable is much deeper than such a surface reading. It waves a beckoning hand pulling us into a single moment, a snapshot, which in fact represents every moment of life. It is a paradigm or a template for what life in the Kingdom of God is like. And that Kingdom is not like any other we know!

Jesus tells this story, according to St. Luke, following a set of questions about love. A lawyer poses a question—"what is necessary to have eternal life?" He is not asking about life everlasting, but about what it means to find the reign of God in this life. Jesus asks him how he reads the requirements of the Law and is given a good answer; the Shema or Great Commandment—to love God with every bit of who we are, and our neighbor as ourselves. But as with so many questions we ask, we already know the answer; we would prefer something requiring a little less of us. So the barrister asks, "Who is my neighbor", trying to qualify what is required. What we all get in the story is far more than we expect. It is not so much 'who is my neighbor' as it is 'what does it mean for me to be a neighbor'!! Do you get the difference? The first allows us to set our limits; the latter is a question that is always present when we encounter others; no matter who they may be. We used to have a dictum when I was teaching Tae Kwon Do, which says, "the measure of a person's heart and soul is how they treat those from whom they can gain nothing". Is not this the position of the Samaritan? He is from a people who are at absolute odds with the Jews. They are in disagreement over who keeps the Law properly and which group rightly worships Yahweh. They are as alienated as 2 peoples can be. The priest and the Levite know if this man is dead they will be defiled and unable to perform their ritual responsibilities, so they follow the Law. The Samaritan owes this poor

traveler nothing. Yet it is his compassion that leads him to act, and touch, and spend, and in the end insure the injured man will not be imprisoned by owing a debt he cannot now pay. It is compassion that trumps merely doing what is required. Is this not the position God is in with regard to each of us? Who among us can say we have received grace only equal to what we deserve? The Samaritan gives only out of who he is in his depths. I have a suspicion that the Samaritan in this parable is God, and that we may well be the traveler in the ditch!! Once healed and restored, life looks very new.

This is a story of compassion and love, but as the narrative shows it is not about love in some rarefied realm nor is it a theoretical study into the concept of love. Our culture and time, like many before us, has turned love into a feeling of warmth where we are given an emotional high. It tends to come and go without explanation, and generally it makes us the focal point. Compassion and love as Christ defines it always seeks and asks, what will be the best for the other. At times we need to be the ones receiving such love, but always we have the chance to be a sign of God's compassion for a hurting world.

Have you ever asked yourself what it would be like or look like if God suddenly and unbidden showed up in front of you? How would you and I recognize the mysterious presence of God? Hollywood uses trick photography like in the movie the 10 Commandments or fancy computer graphics like in Raiders of the Lost Ark to suggest the power and majesty of God. That has not been true, at least for me. Rather it is usually 'packaged' in a different picture. That picture is in the unconditional love of another, who touches us gently where we hurt and are wounded. God's presence looks more like the Samaritan; like one filled with true love and compassion, even when we have put ourselves in harm's way. **True love calls us to see anew that to love a neighbor IS a place where God can be encountered, and where eternal life is found.** Might it not be true that in our most open relationships and interactions we actually are meeting Christ, and that God uses these relationships as His most important works? Amen+