

Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity 2020

Gal. 3: 16-22

Luke 10: 23-37

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

I have a friend who when beginning to tell a story or protracted episode will say, “If I have already told you this hold up two fingers.” (Sometimes it is three or more.) Given the fact that some of us are inclined to repeat ourselves, it is a useful non-verbal tool to prevent undue suffering!! If you have heard this parable before today hold up two (or more) fingers. Now retract that down to one digit. We may well have been present at its reading multiple times, but the story's power can never be depleted by numerous hearings. In fact, just when you think the message is plain and simple, it elicits level after level of response.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is quite familiar, at least on the surface. But before jumping to that story it would be well to listen to the encounter between Jesus and the lawyer who seeks to tempt or test him. By the way, it is the same word used in Luke 4 in the temptation narrative. That exchange is rather remarkable. Normally when we think of a conflict or debate, we expect point and counterpoint with the differences in positions clearly delineated. There is usually disagreement about the position held by an opponent, and propositions to the contrary are offered up hoping to show superior argument that is indisputable. In this back and forth we find the lawyer asking a question, Jesus inquiring about the man's thoughts, and then affirming them one and all. Let's contextualize this for a moment. Can you imagine such a conversation between Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Leader Mitch McConnell where essential agreement is reached and a balanced mutual hearing is found? It is only when the irony of the lawyer's attempt to take one step too many occurs that we reach the true and deep meaning here. Having agreed that the law is summed up in the Shema—“Love the Lord with heart, mind, body, and soul, and your neighbor as yourself”, and having heard the call to ‘do this and you shall live’ (that is, have the full life of God within you), the man suddenly has spiritual amnesia and asks “Who is my neighbor?”. It is a delightfully dishonest question meant to avoid the obvious: his relationship to both friend and stranger. Jesus' response is essentially whoever may be my neighbor or whatever their condition, has nothing to do with God's call to act out of love. The very question is self-serving. St. Thomas Aquinas defines love as “willing the good of the other as the other, and then taking action on it.” Jesus does not argue but draws the lawyer and us into a story that is simply too true to ignore. God's grace toward us looks like the parable and the stamp on the exchange is “Go and do likewise”.

How should we delve into this conversation and this parable? At one level it looks a bit like a morality play; a model of storytelling popular in the middle ages and in the time of Shakespeare. Actors and troubadours would move about the countryside putting on theatre that carried a moral to be held up as virtuous. Some were light and others a bit darker in tenor. You may recall in Hamlet where a group develops a play based on a dream Hamlet has about his uncle, Claudius, murdering Hamlet's father, and surreptitiously marrying the widow. The performance is meant to show the truth in such a stark and unbending way that the guilty have to acknowledge their failure, and others learn what is morally upright and what vices break human nature as God intends it to be. There is an element of that here. But as CS Lewis reminds us, we can never reduce Jesus to merely a moral teacher with good lessons to be learned as if he were an ethics instructor. In fact,

he was not the first to conjoin these two commandments. There is something deeper here. Karl Barth, the Swiss theologian once commented that every parable is ultimately about who Jesus is, and I would add, that it therefore is about who God is for us! Let us then unfold a bit of the story.

“A certain man went from Jerusalem to Jericho”, begins the tale. It is unlikely that Jesus was offering a travel scope description or a lesson in geography. It is true when you leave Jerusalem at 2575 feet about sea level, you go down to Jericho at 864 feet below sea level, so the shift is dramatic in climate and travel. The road going down was referred to as the Way of Blood due to the dangerous personnel that often attacked the unwary traveler. Jericho was ancient. It was the haven of the very wealthy, attracted all manner of beggars as well as criminals, and had quite a reputation. It is nearly the opposite of Jerusalem whose name means the Abode or City of Peace. Mount Sion was the center of religious, spiritual, and cultural life and represented the well-ordered existence God desires for the people. It was literally the center of the world. It represents what we would most love to have in our time, that is peace, unity, and justice, while Jericho more closely reflects what we are seeing; disorder and brokenness.

Jesus tells us ‘a certain man went down’, and that is a loaded image. It struck me recently in studying this passage that we know virtually nothing of him. I have always assumed he was an upright sort of chap going about his business; perhaps making an important contact in Jericho. But there is another aspect to the description that is disconcerting. What if, this man is on the wrong road, literally and spiritually? What if, in leaving behind the hope and stability of Jerusalem he is selecting the wrong path for his life? Truthfully, we do not know for the text doesn't tell us. But one thing is sure and that is that the road becomes an image for sin which is the very thing that robs us of wholeness and peace and a joyful future. It robs us of life and leaves us half-dead, which means only half-alive. This state of living in survivalist mode where we can neither move back or forward is what sin does. A year and a half ago my youngest sister became ill and due to a missed diagnosis was not allocated the treatment needed to thrive. It appeared she had a kidney infection when in fact it was masked appendicitis, which ruptured and caused peritonitis. She spent nearly three full weeks hospitalized, much of it seriously ill. Now understand that she is little sister, a shadow compared to my size, and a rock climber; in short-a tough little lady. But she told me that at times she couldn't even get up out of bed by herself. This is the state of the man in our parable—unable to salve the damage done and totally dependent. This is the state of us all in the face of sin. Something outside us is essential and necessary to be lifted out of the mire. And please note that regardless of his complicity or innocence, compassion becomes that lifting up or salvation. It is due to no merit from the victim. I wonder specifically when and where in each of our lives we have the man on the road, perhaps hanging by a thread?

According to our parable two respected leaders walk by and for reasons unknown select to ignore what cannot be unseen—human tragedy and suffering. What makes this part of the parable the real surprise is there were three classes or groups of people in Israel at the time of Jesus; priests, Levites, and...(who) everyone else!!! So, when Jesus tells this story and the first two scurry along everyone knew the third traveler had to be an ordinary citizen. And instead, we get a Samaritan—an archenemy, who is the deliverer of grace and hope. What if I were to say, “A citizen went up from Greensboro to Washington to plead for unbiased governing and along the way was accosted. A Democrat saw them but passed by and then a Republican also came that way, but also passed on the other side, but a Lobbyist viewed the citizen and had compassion and tended to the wounds and even offered his own HMO policy to cover the extra costs of healing.” Do you get the surprise?

A man who by law and custom had no obligation to assist, let alone care out of the substance of his being becomes the one who fulfills the Law—the Shema.

It is not easy to get into the full heart of this parable. Perhaps it is because we rarely ask the kinds of questions the lawyer asks. We think of gaining eternal life as an escape from this world of struggle rather than a quality of life that exists now as well as beyond time and space. Perhaps the parable is troubling to us because we are now part of a world that had become highly driven by a sense of entitlement and the belief that if someone else gains in this life, I will be diminished, which is not true. Or perhaps the parable makes us uneasy because it does ask us to step out of our comfort and be open to others we would not select to be a neighbor.

Jesus is of course, the Good Samaritan. He is the one rejected who lifts the broken out of sin and degradation to hope. And sometimes those lifted up happen to be us. He transmutes the law into Gospel. He shows us that it is not 'who deserves to be cared for' that ought to be our concern, but that in the shadow of God's great compassion we are called simply to be as our Saviour and Father. Go and do likewise. Amen+