

Fifth Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/C): "Am I a Neighbor?"
Luke 10:25-37
July 13-14, 2019
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Pastor Mark & I were driving up Madison Ave. in New York City on Friday and a church signboard caught my eye: "Parable of the Roadside Victim." I figured it's a sermon title and thought, "Oh, they're following the lectionary, too!" (The lectionary is our 3 year cycle of assigned Scripture readings for worship.) So what's another, more familiar name for the Parable of the Roadside Victim? Right! The parable of the Good Samaritan....

If I weren't **here** I might be **there**, to hear what that other pastor is going to say, because "the Roadside Victim" is not the main character in the story; the Good Samaritan is. A good Samaritan would be a foreign concept to the Jews of Jesus' time. They would have considered "Good Samaritan" to be an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms, something that doesn't make sense if you think about. My dad served in Army Intelligence during World War II, and he always said "Army Intelligence" is a good example of an oxymoron ☺. So is "colossal shrimp," "tiny giant," "deafening silence," "holy war."

The Samaritan is the **unlikeliest** of heroes in this story. Like many prejudices, the Jews and Samaritans of Jesus' day despised each other because of painful history that had happened centuries before. The Assyrians invaded Israel, the northern part of the kingdom, in 722 BC. The majority of educated Jews were hauled away into exile, never to return, hence the 10 "lost tribes of Israel." The Assyrians left an occupation force behind, as conquerors do, and eventually the Jews who remained in Israel intermarried with their captors and became known as the Samaritans (from the name of the place where they lived, Samaria). The Jews "down South" in Judah never forgave them for fraternizing with the enemy, any more than the French forgave the women who

slept with the Nazis during WW II. The Samaritans were looked down upon as **half-breeds** and **heretics**. Maybe you remember Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4). The Samaritans' hub of worship wasn't the temple in Jerusalem (they'd been opposed to rebuilding it) but Mt. Gerizim. Their beliefs weren't "orthodox" according to other Jews, and they were as low as you could get on the "less than" totem pole.

So one of these supposed deadbeat Samaritans rises like cream to the top of this story Jesus tells. If the parable had a predictable ending, the priest and the Levite would have been the heroes, the men to emulate, the knights in shining armor. But here's a question that **might** sound like the beginning of a joke:

"Why did the priest and the Levite cross the street?"

- Well, they might have been afraid that the whole "guy in a ditch at the side of the road" scenario was a set-up. Maybe the supposed victim was a con-man playing possum while his no-good friends lay in wait in the bushes hoping some do-gooder ("good Samaritan" so to speak) would come along so they could mug him.
- Or maybe they were on their way to the Temple to perform some holy duty that required them to be ritually clean. If the poor fellow in the ditch were completely dead (and not just half-dead, like he looked) and they touched him they'd be rendered unclean for Temple worship and would have to wait 7 days to be able to work again. (What if they were out of PTO?? What if they were working on a perfect attendance award?)

Somebody who studied this story and thought about it a lot concluded that in the end it doesn't matter **why** the priest and the Levite crossed the street. They may have been **full** of self-justification, but they were **empty** of love. Somebody needed what they had to give and they withheld it: the gift of time, the gift of compassion, the gift of hands-on care, the gift of money for a safe place to heal.

We don't know much about the guy who's half-dead in a ditch at the beginning of the story and recuperating in an inn by the end of it. He was traveling alone, which was not too bright on the steep, winding, 20 mile road that led from Jerusalem down to Jericho. It had a terrible reputation

as a highway of death. There were blind corners to turn, ravines for robbers to hide in, no rest stops along the way, no traveler's aid society to come to one's assistance. Let's not be too harsh that he chose to travel alone, though – 'sounds like the priest, the Levite and the Samaritan all traveled solo, too.

We don't know the traveler's religion. We don't know if he was more of a saint or a sinner, a good family man or a deadbeat dad, gainfully employed or unemployed, a local or a Benny. 'Didn't matter to the Samaritan. His philosophy was like that of Montefiore who said, "**Who[ever] needs me is my neighbor.**"

It was a lawyer, an expert in the Jewish law, whose question, "Who is my neighbor?" spurred Jesus' telling of this parable. *The Message* version of this Gospel says that the lawyer was "looking for a loophole." I don't know if that's a fair judgment or not. But someone schooled in the Law would certainly be a stickler for detail. It's only natural the fellow would want to know what was **required** by the Law. He probably would have been glad if Jesus had said **the few** rather than **the many** qualify as "neighbor." But Jesus turned the whole thing around. At the end of the story He asks the lawyer a question:

"Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" (Luke 10:36)

The answer?

"The one who showed him mercy." (Luke 10:37a)
"The one who treated him kindly." (The Message)

Jesus didn't respond, "Well done, Grasshopper." He commanded him, "**Go and do likewise.**" (Luke 10:37b)

So that goes for us, too. We also should "**Go and do likewise.**" We should ask ourselves, "**Am I a neighbor?**" Let's entertain the possibility that God's plan for our day is different than the

one we have in mind for ourselves. Let's realize that showing others mercy and treating all of God's creatures kindly may displace the people we thought we needed to see or the places we thought we needed to go or the tasks we thought we needed to accomplish. This fellow christened "the good Samaritan" didn't get out of bed that morning planning to haul someone out of a ditch. He wasn't expecting to interrupt his appointed rounds by becoming a first responder. But his neighbor's need to **receive** help became his need to **offer** help, without counting the cost to himself, without weighing the worthiness of the stranger he'd happened upon, without allowing fears or work responsibilities or time urgency to make him avert his eyes and cross to the other side of the road.

The reason Pastor Mark & I were in the City on Friday was to see the DaVinci painting "St. Jerome in the Desert," on loan to the Met from the Vatican Museum. It's fascinating because DaVinci never finished it, allowing us to "peek behind the scenes" and gain insight into his artistic process. But the coolest thing of all is that DaVinci's fingerprint is visible in the upper left-hand corner of the painting. The curators of the exhibit blew up a photo of the fingerprint so viewers can really appreciate it. It was the most memorable of many beautiful things I saw that day. Wow. We're seeing **DaVinci's** fingerprint, 500 years after he left it. 'Made me think that the Samaritan saw and recognized **God's** fingerprints all over the battered guy in the ditch. How could he not help this precious, bloodied, creation of the beloved Creator? How could he possibly ignore him and cross to the other side of the road? **God forgive** us for the times when **we've** been the ones who have crossed to the other side. **God bless** those who have come to our aid when **we've** been "the stranger in the ditch." **God grant** us grace gladly to set aside our own plans when our neighbor needs us. **God inspire** us to ask ourselves daily, "Am I being a neighbor?" Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham