

The Church of the Pilgrimage
Rev. Dr. Helen Nablo
June 25, 2017

Luke 10:25-37

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" "What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?" He answered, "'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, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live." But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.' "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

Neighbors

I think most of you know that when today's worship service concludes the members of the Mission team heading to Downeast Maine will stop by coffee hour, grab a piece of cake celebrating our new members, head to the circle by the JRC to load up the van and other cars and make the nice long journey up the coast of Maine. For months now we've been talking about the trip, fundraising for it, and today is the day the adventure begins.

Our work, our third such work trip, will be with a program of Down East Maine Missions, a program called Neighbors Helping Neighbors which helps with home repair and improvement. Washington County Maine – where we will be working – is one of the poorest counties in the country. In addition, it has a large older and aging population with equally aging housing stock. Many folks simply cannot afford to do necessary repairs to maintain their homes. Our projects with Neighbors Helping Neighbors will be building or repairing decks, stairs, ramps, roofs, skirting around mobile homes, and painting.

So it is an interesting Sunday in which to ponder Jesus' encounter with the lawyer and Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan. Who is our neighbor? That's the question the lawyer asked Jesus, the question that prompted the whole story about a roadside beating, those who walked by, and those who did not.

On the surface, you might say this story is exceedingly simple. It's about showing mercy, compassion. The late Kurt Vonnegut perhaps grasped this as the essence of Christianity when he was asked by a young American from Pittsburgh "Please tell me that it will all be okay" --perhaps the modern equivalent of asking for eternal life. "Welcome to Earth, young man" Vonnegut said. "It's hot in the summer and cold in the winter. It's round and wet and crowded. At the outside, Joe, you've got about a hundred years here. There's only one rule that I know of: Damn it, Joe, you've got to be *kind*." (Kurt Vonnegut, *A Man Without a Country*, p. 107)

You've got to be kind. It's real, it's true, and if that were all the Good Samaritan story was about I could sit down now, we could move right to our mission trip commissioning, and get on to Allerton Hall, shaking our new members hands and eating that celebratory cake. But there's more to it than that. There is something that needs to be put together with kindness. Jesus parable demands it.

To get to this "something more" what we need to do is put ourselves not in the place of the clergy who walk on by (hypocritical clergy once again, just like in all the movies) not in the place of the clergy who recoil but in the place of the one in the ditch, the one who is beaten, lying there vulnerable, wondering if they are going to get out of this day alive. Bible scholar Amy Jill Levine says "We should think of ourselves as the person in the ditch, and then ask "Is there anyone, from any group, about whom we'd rather die than acknowledge "She offered help" or "He showed compassion"? More, is there any group whose members might rather die than help us? If so, then we know how to find the modern equivalent of the Good Samaritan." (Amy Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew*, p. 148-149)

So what if we did just that, imagined ourselves lying there in the ditch, and substituted for Samaritan "Muslim", "Sikh" "Buddhist" or "Jew"? Or how about "Heavily tattooed Biker dude" or "transgender" Or "member of _____" (fill in the blank for whatever political party is not your own") Amy Jill Levine says that for her, a Jew, the person would be a member of Hamas. She went so far in a lecture after September 11th to say the one who proved to be neighbor was a member of Al Qaeda.

Does this seem provocative to you? Well, Jesus was kind and compassionate and also provocative. He wasn't provocative simply to get a rise out of people, or grab their attention but he was persistent, he was determined about addressing, or naming, the barriers that keep us one from another. To quote Walter Bruggeman in something I saw just yesterday on Facebook: "The gospel is a very dangerous idea. Jesus did not get crucified because he was a nice man." It was—at least in part -- telling stories like this one stories that challenged people's beloved prejudices that got Jesus in so much trouble.

In fact, we might notice in Jesus discussion with the lawyer, after Jesus has presented this parable, there is a question: Now who was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers? And the lawyer says "the one who showed

kindness". This man is a product of his culture, he has been so trained, so conditioned to live in suspicion of Samaritans that he cannot say the name "Samaritan". But Jesus has helped the lawyer see the concept of "neighbor" in a new light, which is to say apart from his preconceived notions, his set categories.

So the parable is not just about being kind. It's about being open to kindness coming from surprising directions. So to live this parable this week, we might keep our eyes open to folks who we did not expect to show *us* kindness. Maybe it will be the kind of tough looking person in line at the grocery store who says "no really -- you go on ahead". Maybe it will be the person who always looks like they have it all together letting you know that actually they struggle too. Maybe on the Mission trip, it will be someone taking time to pay attention to you, listen to you, encourage you – someone you did not expect that sort of kindness from.

In any given week, there can be surprises – times that kindness comes to us and we are caught blinking because we could not have anticipated it.

So there is being kind, our being kind and there is being open to others being kind to you, and both of these things are in Jesus brilliant parable. And that it is a Samaritan, or your equivalent of a Samaritan means that we don't get to be superior. We don't get to be the ones who always give and never receive. There are times we are acted upon by a love whose limitless goodness we cannot fathom.

Earlier in our prayer time I shared about Emmaline and the great progress she has made. This week, to see this girl, who was weeks ago just clinging to life, now talking, laughing, singing was nothing short of a miracle. When I walked in the room she surprised me. I could count on one hand the number of times she and I had even exchanged "Good mornings" or "Hello" (she has much more of a relationship with our director of Christian education, Jenny Healy) but when I walked in the room she said Oh the Pastor is here and I'm gonna cry. Thank you for coming. She said. How long can you stay? She said.

Later Emmaline shared *her* surprise at all the cards she has received. from the school, from family friends, and from our church. "I don't even know these people" she said. "And they are sending me cards!" It was so wonderful to see how much better Emmaline is doing. And since Emma's sight was coming back to her that very afternoon, it was wonderful to have all these surprises right in the midst of a pastoral visit. On my way home from the hospital I drove down Cliff Road in Plymouth. Cliff Road is by my home. It is often used as cut through road, for people working to get over to Plymouth beach, or for people moving along route 3A wanting to head on over to the highway at exit four. Someone had newly placed a sign on their lawn, right alongside the road. Drive like your kids lived here the sign said. I lift this up because I happen to know who lives in that house and it is two gay men, married, who have two big boisterous dogs, but no children. That they put this sign up to protect other people's kids well it was a surprise for me -- an example I

would say of my own presuppositions being challenged. Those two men were, for me, an example of the neighbors we are called to be, which is to say people who look out for one another.

So. For our mission trip. I hope we'll be open to one another and to everyone we meet – open to those we will show kindness to and those who also may surprise us by showing kindness to us. In her UCC daily devotion yesterday, in the prayer part Mary Luti spoke of *God's upending mercies being everywhere* “and even I have received them” she says.

This is the spirit of Jesus Good Samaritan story. May it be the spirit of our living, the spirit of our faith.

Amen.