

Pentecost 5 Proper 10

Amos 7:7-17

Colossians 1:1-14

Luke 10: 25-37

A man was being tailgated by a stressed out woman on a busy boulevard. Suddenly, the light turned yellow, just in front of him. He did the right thing, stopping at the crosswalk, even though he could have beaten the red light by accelerating through the intersection.

The tailgating woman was furious and honked her horn, screaming in frustration as she missed her chance to get through the intersection.

As she was still in mid-rant, she heard a tap on her window and looked up into the face of a very serious police officer. The officer ordered her to exit her car with her hands up. He took her to the police station where she was searched, finger printed, photographed, and placed in a holding cell. After a couple of hours, a policeman approached the cell and opened the door. She was escorted back to the booking desk where the arresting officer was waiting with her personal effects.

He said, "I'm very sorry for this mistake. You see, I pulled up behind your car while you were blowing your horn, flipping off the guy in front of you, and cussing a blue streak at him. I noticed the 'What Would Jesus Do' bumper sticker, the 'Choose Life' license plate holder, the 'Follow Me to Sunday-School' bumper sticker, and the chrome-plated Christian fish emblem on the trunk, Naturally... I assumed you had stolen the car."

The officer could not imagine this woman was who she was advertising herself to be, because her actions did not match what the cop expected of a Christian. In today's Gospel reading, the parable of the Good Samaritan, and throughout Jesus' ministry, he moves about in the world doing the same thing this cop was doing. He continually invites us to see the world as he sees it, and to respond according to God's law, not according to our own impulses. We tend to interpret the Mosaic law in ways that are comfortable and easy. And Jesus is having none of it! He continually raises the bar on how we are to love. In this case, he stretches the definition of "neighbor," as in "love thy neighbor," to a shocking extent.

When Jesus uses the example of a Samaritan showing mercy for the beaten traveler, it's the equivalent of telling a member of the Sharks they were expected to come to the aid of a Jet, or a Hatfield to save a McCoy, or a German Jew to minister to a Nazi soldier. Jesus pushes the definition of neighbor to include all of humanity.

I was brought up with the image of Jesus as the soft spoken teacher, the shepherd carrying the sheep, the gentle story teller with the little children gathered around, the quiet man kneeling in the garden to pray. But the more I study the way Jesus functioned in the world, the more I see the challenging, never quite satisfied leader, always saying "look here now, you can do more." And in this story he explains, very subtly, why he is always pushing for more expansive love and what's in it for us. The "why" is easy to miss in this parable, we tend to gloss over the nuance of language Jesus uses.

The lawyer asks Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” After the lawyer recites the law, Jesus says, “You have given the right answer, do this, and you will live.” Did you catch it? The lawyer asks about “inheriting eternal life,” something to be gained in the future. Jesus replies that if he loves God and neighbor, he will live, now. That’s a really important distinction!

It’s called “realized eschatology,” the belief that blessings and benefits typically associated with the end times can be experienced as a present reality.¹ We might call it, “experiencing a little slice of heaven on earth.”

Colossians, the source of our Epistle reading today, is one of the New Testament documents which emphasizes realized eschatology. In it, Paul applauds the faith of the community in Colossae, and reminds them of how much they have already benefited from following Jesus. He remarks on the abundance of their good works, ever since the day they “heard and truly comprehended the grace of God.” He is reminding his audience that living in loving connection with God, delivers the promises of the next world, the Kingdom to come, into this world. Those promises are not for abundance of possessions or lives which are without challenges. The promise of the Kingdom is a life of joy and love and hope, even in the face of often difficult and sometimes tragic life circumstances. But “Kingdom” requires a concerted effort on the part of each individual, and is an individual experience leading to a collective transformation.

You see, my brothers and sisters, the Kingdom of God is not a place or an aspiration. With apologies to all of you who have radar ears for grammatical liberties, I am going to insist that “Kingdom” with a capital “K” is a verb. (If Google can be a verb, so can Kingdom!) It is an action. And in the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus makes it very clear that action is what counts. It was not what the Samaritan believed about the man in the ditch or what thoughts raced through his head of all the reasons he should not stop to help. It was that he was willing to see what had happened, see the world from the vantage point of the ditch, and that he did something!

Having compassion for all is a start. But Jesus has raised the bar on that one too. The Samaritan knew compassion was not enough, unless it gets translated into action. The priest and the Levite might very well have had compassion for the wounded man. But they would not see, or respond.

In Hebrew, the root of the word for compassion is *rehem*, meaning womb, a source of nourishment, where we grow and prepare to survive in the world. In Bonnie Thurston’s book, *Practicing Silence*, she poetically describes God as *rehem*, the womb “in Whom we grow, from Whom we go...with a rending shudder, [God] pushes us further into life.” God is pushing us from compassion, a feeling, to mercy, an action. And in actions of mercy, we will find life.

The Samaritan, who was an unwelcomed stranger in Judea, was less concerned about the threats to himself if he stopped to give aid, and more concerned about the consequences for the man in the ditch if he did not stop to help. He went beyond compassion and, as the lawyer in our story correctly identifies, the Samaritan performs an act of mercy. And most importantly to Jesus in this story, mercy is extended toward the one who, before he ended up in the ditch, would have shunned the Samaritan’s good will.

¹ Mark Allen Powell, *Introducing the New Testament*, pg 365.

"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."

If you are looking for the boundary line to show you who God expects you to consider a neighbor, you are essentially asking, who do I not need to love? Sorry, I'm not answering that question.

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