



Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 10
Rev. Jonathan Stepp
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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A country preacher was leading a revival one hot summer night in a church way back in the hills. He prided himself on memorizing his sermon and the text that he would preach, so he went into the pulpit with no notes and no Bible. As he reached the crescendo of his message he intended to quote the book of Revelation but suddenly his mind went completely blank – he could only remember the first line of the verse. Hoping the whole text would come to him if he just started saying it, he cried out in a loud voice “Behold, I am coming quickly . . .” but it didn’t jog his memory so he said it again, “Behold, I am coming quickly . . .” and still nothing. Finally, in desperation, he stepped boldly from behind the pulpit, called out one more time “Behold, I am coming quickly . . .” and in his excitement he fell right off the pulpit platform and into the lap of a rather large mountain woman who was sitting on the front row fanning herself furiously.

Red with embarrassment and completely flustered the preacher leaped back to his feet apologizing profusely for falling on her, but the woman just said, “hit’s alright preacher, I shoulda dodged outta your way – you warned me three time you was comin’!”

Since we started reading through Luke, beginning back in Advent, I have warned you several times that difficult words from Jesus are coming. And here today we have come to some of them – the story we call the Parable of the Good Samaritan. The challenging nature of this parable can be hidden from us, however, because the story is so familiar to us. In fact, the story is so familiar that the very phrase “Good Samaritan” has entered into our language as a reference for someone who helps out another who is in distress.

When we first learned this story in childhood, hearing it in our bible story books or Sunday school, we learned that the lesson was to be nice to others and help them out when they need help. That is a good lesson and I will say to you this morning: if you don’t know that you’re supposed to help others out when they’re in

trouble then consider yourself now informed. Yes, Jesus is calling you to help your neighbor out when he or she needs your help.

But there is a lot more going on in this story than just a calling from God for us to be nice people. The first clue that something deeper is going on is the question that prompts the story. The lawyer – and by the way, this is not a lawyer who writes wills this is a religious lawyer, an expert in the Bible and in theology – the lawyer does not ask “how can I be a nice person?” The religious lawyer asks “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” The whole reason Jesus tells this story is not because he’s trying to explain how to be nice. The whole reason Jesus tells this story is because he’s trying to explain what it looks like to enter into eternal life. Or, to put it another way, Jesus is trying to explain what it looks like to be a child of God.

Since eternal life is something that only God has, in order to enter into eternal life we have to be connected to and sharing in the life of God. The eternal Father has to adopt us into the eternal life of the Son through the eternal life of the Holy Spirit. But what does that look like? How can we know that we are living in eternal communion with the eternal God? Well, Jesus replies, it looks like the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

So, let’s look a little more closely. There are two main characters: one is a helpless, broken, man lost and left for dead on the side of the road. The other is a Samaritan. At this point you need to know – if you don’t already – that the Jewish people hated the Samaritans and the Samaritans hated the Jews. The hatred between the two groups was based on race, religion, and money. You know, all the reasons that we humans find to hate each other. Based on this, then, we have to conclude that eternal life – that communion with the eternal Trinity – looks like a helpless, broken person being rescued by an outcast that people hate.

Does that at all sound familiar? In our epistle reading today St. Paul says that God “has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” Like the robbery victim in the Parable we were in need of help and held in the power of darkness until God sent his Son – a man whom we rejected and hated like the Jews used to hate the Samaritans – and that Son rescued us and healed us.

I believe this is the first and, in some ways, most difficult challenge that this parable presents to us. We don’t want to think of ourselves as needing help. We want to believe that we are strong and smart and capable and that if God will just tell us what rules we need to follow then we will follow them and God will then be obligated to give us eternal life – because that’s the contract and we’ve lived up to our end of the bargain. But

the Parable of the Good Samaritan tells us that eternal life does not look like a good, strong person doing what is right and earning their place in God's life. Eternal life looks like us in need of rescue and that rescue coming from the most unexpected and even – in some ways – unwelcome place.

The second difficult challenge that this parable presents to us is found in Jesus' final statement: "Go and do likewise." If we are going to be like the Good Samaritan – that is to say, if we are going to be like Jesus – then we have to move out of our own brokenness, lostness, and injury, and into a place of healing through the Holy Spirit where we can join with Jesus in reaching out to those who are the broken, the rejected, and the lost of our world. Who is our neighbor that we are to love? Jesus tells us that it is not just the person who lives next door to us in a house like ours, the person who likes the same operas that we like and enjoys eating at the same restaurants we enjoy.

The neighbor whom we are to love is the Samaritan that life has trained us to ignore and disregard, whomever that may be for us. The gay person, the transgender person, the unborn person unwanted by her parents, the immigrant, the refugee, the drug addict, the democrat, the republican, the rich person, the poor person – whomever we have learned to ignore and pass by, that is the person we are called to love. Why? Because God first loved us. When we were refugees from sin and sorrow, God took us into his life. When we were helplessly addicted to sin, God reached out to us. When our lives were broken with despair, God bandaged our wounds, pouring oil and wine on them, and made us his beloved children in Christ.

And this is where the two difficult challenges of the parable come together. If I think I'm a basically good person, who has done a good job of following the rules all my life, and that God has to accept me and love me because of what a good job I've done, then when I see someone I have been trained to ignore, or someone who is broken and hurting, then I will likely pass by on the other side of the road like the Priest and the Levite. It is only when I know myself to be a broken person healed by Christ that I can truly enter into the eternal life of the Triune God and be a co-worker with Christ to bring healing into the lives of others.

What we are talking about is cultivating compassion in ourselves and in the communities we are a part of. God is compassionate community – we have been embraced into the compassionate life of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and the Triune God who made us is calling us to see all of humanity as our neighbors – to see all of humanity as part of the same eternal life with God that we are part of.

May our compassionate and loving Father, who rescued us from darkness through his Son, give us through the Holy Spirit the grace to look beyond our own tribal identities and see everyone else in the world with the same compassionate eyes with which God sees them. Amen.