



Sermon for the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 17
Rev. Jonathan Stepp
September 1, 2019

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

There was a priest in a small town church who was constantly harping on his parishioners about their bad habits, such as drinking too much. One day he invited a man with especially bad habits to come over for dinner. As the man was walking to the rectory that evening he passed a pitiful beggar – disheveled, smelly, with long unwashed hair. The man stopped and asked the beggar, “if I give you 10 dollars will you spend it on liquor?” The beggar said “no, I’ve been sober for 20 years.” And the man said “if I give you 10 dollars will you spend it on cigarettes” and the beggar replied “no, I’ve never smoked, it’s terribly unhealthy.” Finally the man said “if I give you 10 dollars will you just go gamble it away playing dice?” and the beggar said “absolutely not, I need every penny I can get for food.”

So the man said “good, I want you to come with me to the rectory right now and have dinner with me and the priest.” The beggar was shocked, “won’t the priest be offended by my appearance and smell?” he asked. “I don’t care, said the man, I just want the priest to see what happens to someone who gives up drinking, smoking, and gambling.”

Based on his teaching in today’s gospel text, Jesus might applaud the man’s willingness to invite the beggar to dinner even if he is bemused by the man’s reason for doing so.

I know I keep mentioning this from Sunday to Sunday I have to because it keeps coming up: Jesus has some very challenging instructions for us in the Gospel of Luke. Today we are faced with it again when we hear him tell us to invite “the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind” into our homes. Naturally all sorts of questions, objections, and fears immediately arise: what if the stranger I invite into my home tries to hurt me or my family? What if they take advantage of me by stealing from me or abusing my good will?

Before we get too tangled up in such doubts I think we need to take a step back and be sure we understand charity and care for the poor in Jesus’ time. In other words, we need to be sure we understand the context of what Jesus is talking about. In the ancient Roman world there was no welfare, no Medicaid, food stamps, or

even food pantries like Care Net. We all know this from history class but we sometimes forget what that means for the context of Jesus' teaching. In Jesus' day and age it was entirely possible for a child to starve to death, for example, because the government of the Roman Empire provided no social safety net. The only exception that I know of was in the city of Rome itself where the citizens were provided a certain allotment of free grain with which to bake bread – but that was it; and that program did not extend to the provinces such as Palestine where Jesus lived.

In the absence of any social services provided by the community coming together to help with these problems, help for the poor and the sick depended on individual generosity. Scholars of the ancient world agree that it was not an efficient or effective system.¹ For one thing, the Greeks and Romans defined charity as primarily about building public buildings like temples, coliseums, and public baths. Taking care of the poor was an afterthought. Because of God's instruction to them in the Hebrew scriptures, the Jews took the care of the poor much more seriously and seem to have been better at it – but both groups struggled with a major misconception that Jesus is directly challenging in today's teaching.

Both groups believed that, to one degree or another, the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind were suffering because God was displeased with them. At the worst this meant they were ignored and left to suffer. At the best it meant that the charity given to them was given at arm's length. Very, very few ancient people would ever consider inviting a sick or impoverished person into their life – as Jesus tells us to do in today's teaching – out of fear that God's curse upon them might rub off on the one trying to do good.

Since our society has taken a different, and, frankly, more generous and Christ-centered approach to caring for those in need I think we need to look at the big picture of what Jesus is talking about in this passage. In doing so we can hopefully derive timeless principles that we can use to make decisions in our modern context. I see two key points that Jesus is making:

First, God calls us to care for those who are poor and sick. Any theology, ideology, or philosophy that says that we have no duty to care for those who need help is anti-Christ. Why does God call us to care for others? To put it simply, that is who God is. Love for others is the very nature of God's existence. The Father loves the Son in the communion of the Holy Spirit and when the Son became flesh and blood as

1. For a brief overview of charity in the ancient world see Dresser, Sam, "How the Poor became Blessed." *Aeon Magazine*, March 14, 2019. <https://aeon.co/essays/the-poor-might-have-always-been-with-us-but-charity-has-not> Retrieved 08/28/19

the man Jesus Christ the loving relationship of God's life was opened to embrace all of humanity – rich and poor, healthy and sick, strong and weak. Those who need help are our brothers and sisters and our Father in heaven tells us through his Son Jesus Christ that we are to treat them with care, compassion, and respect.

Jesus' second key point is that we must be prepared to embrace radical methods to fulfill God's will that we care for others. I'm not sure that Jesus meant for everyone in his own day and age, or everyone in our day and age, to immediately set up a soup kitchen and a hospital in their home. Truthfully, few people back then and few people today even have the resources to do so. I do think, though, that Jesus wanted to shock us all awake to the fact that what we think of as helping others may only be scratching the surface. It could be that God is calling us to much more radical generosity and concern for others than we ever expected.

As I finish this morning I'd like to try to capture some of the radical nature of what Jesus is talking about by translating it into more modern terms. Here's an example from our day and age.

Some proposals for helping those in need seem radical because they just aren't the way we've done things before. The people of Jesus' time had never reached out to the poor and the sick the way he was calling them to. A similar example for us might be the issue of providing every person in America with health insurance. That isn't a radical idea in the other wealthy nations of the world – they've been doing it for generations using a variety of methods, from government action to government and private sector partnerships. But the idea of everyone having health insurance seems radical to us, just as Jesus' command to invite the sick into their lives seemed to the people of his time, because it just isn't the way we've done things before.

I'm not endorsing any particular plan for health care in America but I am saying that Jesus gives us two moral imperatives with regard to healthcare: 1. we must take care of those who are sick and 2. we must be prepared, if necessary, to do it new ways that might seem radical. As we heard from Hebrews today, "Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God."

As I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon: doubts and fears immediately arise in our minds when we think about making the sacrifices required to engage in radical generosity. The author of Hebrews addresses our fears head-on when he says "Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, 'I will never leave you or forsake you.'" When we trust that Jesus is taking care of us, and will always take care of us, then we are freed to join him in the radical generosity of God and we can say, as Hebrews, says, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid." Amen.