

Fifth Sunday of Pentecost (First Presbyterian Church of Leonia)
Amos 7:7-14
Luke 10: 25-37
“Neighborliness”

It seems like an easy text for a visiting preacher, doesn't it? The story of the Good Samaritan; a parable which rings so familiar in our ears that we might have even found ourselves tuning out, thinking, “Oh, I know this story. I know the message. Love your neighbor as yourself.” Care for others. Don't turn around from those who need help. Simple laws for a foundational, moral message. Dare I say, even the heart of our Christian faith?!

But did you notice the motivation of the lawyer who engages with Jesus? Seeking to “test” Jesus, he asks what he must do to inherit eternal life. He wants the boundaries, the laws, the guidelines to map his journey toward heaven. And it's clear that the lawyer knows the Jewish faith because he proclaims in brief but clear words, the heart of the religious law. But in a bid to justify himself further, he asks, “But who is my neighbor?”

It's an interesting clarifying question, isn't it? Rather than take the recognition of the law to “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,” the lawyer cannot help but desire an explicit answer as to who those neighbors are...and, therefore, who they are not.

In our politically and socially divisive time, this isn't too hard to imagine. We know the challenges of navigating the waters of difference: competing opinions, political persuasions, and assumed ways of being together. We live comfortably in the binaries of the world: who's in and who's out, what is acceptable and what is not, how we have to present ourselves professionally and what is considered outside of bounds for the workplace. Either/or norms are what we use to measure our lives; utilizing them as the plumb line in which we figure out how to move and live and breathe in the world.

Jesus' answer comes in the form of this parable on the "Way of Blood" from Jerusalem all the way down to Jericho. This was a 25-kilometer road, a steep decline from the holy center of the Jewish faith to the familiar urban destination below. It was well known that the road was dangerous and so the hearer of this story, then and now, would not have been surprised that the unnamed man was beaten, robbed, and stripped of everything he had before being left on the side of the road to succumb to his wounds. Hurt to the edge of his life and wiping blood from his face, I wonder if he knew the priest was approach where he lay on the ground. Did he hear footsteps on the path as his head throbbed? Or did he see a figure coming closer and felt the pain of his trampled body? As the footsteps slowed and then quickly passed by on the other side, did he try to call out from a throat that did little more than rumble with the groans of his downtrodden state?

Imagine his body, life slowly escaping from his broken and bleeding skin as the priest walked by on the other side...footsteps louder and louder, then softer and softer as they disappeared into the road ahead. And when all hope seemed to be lost, coming in and out of consciousness, I wonder if the man experienced what he thought was *déjà vu*. More gravel crushing steps coming toward him, slowing, and then quickly moving by on the other side. Gurgling, blood clogged cries stumbling out of the man's mouth as he agonized helplessly on the road.

We don't know how long the man was lying on the hard dirt road before the Samaritan would have been in earshot. But by now, the feelings were probably familiar. Maybe the beaten man heard the stride of a new person coming toward him, saw the outline of a body slowly approaching his own, and gave little thought to what might be next. After all, two people had

already walked by on the other side. At this point he may have had little hope that his fate would be more than a slow, lonely death on this dangerous path.

But then the story shifts. The unnamed man feels the calming touch of another on his skin. He feels someone reach out in compassion, slowly and carefully tending to his wounds with wine, oil, and bandages. A calming balm on open wounds and deep bruises of a man who could have become just another casualty on the road. But this stranger does not stop there, instead he places the beaten man on his own animal and brings him to an inn to recover. Remaining with him for one night, this helper pays the innkeeper and promises more once the length of stay is determined by the man's healing body.

Thousands of years later, we are all too familiar with the "Samaritan." There are hospitals and non-profit organizations taking on the title of "The Good Samaritan" all around. And yet we miss the scandal of this healing stranger with our modern ears. To Jesus' hearers, a priest and Levite would have been familiar characters in the parable, predictable even. The third expected person in the story would have been an Israelite, thus closing the narrative circle for the crowd before him. And yet Jesus chooses the most surprising and disturbing caretaker for the injured man, an enemy of his own faith community. An enemy who reached out in compassion and touched his broken skin, desiring to bring him back from the edge of death to life.

On the eve of his assassination, The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King spoke of this all too familiar parable saying, "Now you know, we use our imagination a great deal to try to determine why the priest and the Levite didn't stop. At times we say they were busy going to church meetings – an ecclesial gathering – and they had to get down to Jerusalem so they wouldn't be late for their meeting. At other times we would speculate that there was a religious law....And every now and then we begin to wonder whether maybe they were not going down to Jerusalem,

or down to Jericho, rather to organize a ‘Jericho Road Improvement Association.’ That’s a possibility. Maybe they felt that it was better to deal with the problem from the casual root, rather than to get bogged down with an individual effort. But I’m going to tell you what my imagination tells me. It’s possible that these men were afraid...it’s possible that the priest and the Levite looked over that man on the ground and wondered if the robbers were still around. Or it’s possible that they felt that the man on the ground was merely faking. And he was acting like he had been robbed and hurt, in order to seize them over there, lure them there for quick and easy seizure. And so the first question that the Levite asked was, ‘If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?’ But then the Good Samaritan came by. And he reversed the question: “If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?” (“I See The Promised Land”)

“Who is my neighbor?” the lawyer asks.

He could easily have asked more directly, “Who must I care for and who can I leave on the side of the road?”

Yet Jesus turns his inquiry on its head and asks the eager lawyer before him, “Which of these was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” Not who is this man’s neighbor, but who acted as a neighbor to the one before them.

The answer is not simple for the lawyer. Though he knows it is the Samaritan, he cannot allow the name of his religious enemy to tumble out of his lips, instead responding, “The one who showed him mercy.”

We would do well to understand all of the hospitals, non-profits, and individuals naming the Good Samaritan to remember the scandalous nature of what is actually being conveyed.

As a person of color watching our nation torn asunder by racism, it would be as if these places were named after the white supremacist forces working against our bodies. The ones who

are responsible for the rise in Asian American and Pacific Islander hate or the violence against black and brown bodies that make even grocery stores and church sanctuaries unsafe or the defense around the borders of the country to prevent the immigrant from finding safety within.

For childbearing people, it would be the lawmakers and groups seeking to control bodies and the care of them.

For the LGBTQAI+ people, it would be the political leaders and religious groups attempting to legislate the relationship with those who love them.

For families who send their children to school each day and worry if “that call” will come as small bodies crouch under desks or behind cubbies for cover, it would be the people demanding individual freedom and the right to bear arms.

Thinking of it this way almost makes it as though anything named “Good Samaritan” can be paradoxical to the care, compassion, and mercy assumed to be within. A hospital or organization named after our greatest enemy transformed into a place in which we allow our bruised, beaten, or broken bodies to be healed by the one whom we deemed as other.

The challenge for us today is the duality of this story: Can we imagine the one who we name as our enemy, the person whose beliefs lead to the disempowerment and dismantling of everything we believe and are; can we fathom that this person might reach out to us to tend to our wounds? Would we allow them to touch us in our most vulnerable state, to place a salve on our bleeding and bruised body and create space for us to heal?

Yet the reverse is also true. Can we imagine reaching out to our enemy, the individual or groups that have consistently worked against our right to live whole lives, and care for them? As we came across the beaten body of our enemy, would our footsteps come to a stop, our fingers reaching out as we gently say, “It’s okay. You’re going to be okay. *I’ve got you.*”

I once served in a church where the words “Servant’s Entrance” were written above the doors leading out of the sanctuary. Each Sunday as we conclude worship, we would walk outside of those doors reminded that the work was just beginning, each of us sent out into the world to be a servant within.

Here’s the thing: In the story we find the characters from the parable walking on this dangerous road between Jerusalem and Jericho. And sure, we don’t know which path they were taking; but please indulge me for a moment to consider the journey from the heights of Jerusalem to the below sea level location of Jericho. As the priest and Levite leave the holy city of their faith, little is transformed. They get stuck within themselves...and I wonder what this says about their own faith and personal lives. Whatever it was, there was something stopping them from connecting a love of self with the love of their neighbor; after all, as the lawyer articulated, we are to love our neighbor as ourselves.

The central question for us today is how your life together in this sanctuary, how any given worship service, learning, and gathering opportunity, transforms how you walk down the “Way of Blood” outside of it. Because the world out there sometimes feels dangerous. There are laws and assumptions about communal life together that do not value the right to life of every single living creature and natural thing in Creation. It can become easy to allow our complacency or fear to draw us to walk on the other side. But if our faith is to be anything, to make any difference in a world torn asunder, then we have to walk on this dangerous road and stop to help those in need. And, when we are broken and beat down, we have to allow others to care for us...enemy or friend.

Today, as you hear these words and prepare to come to the Table that Christ has prepared for us, may we be nourished and strengthened for the work ahead. Because friends, God's kin-dom will only be possible as we enter the world as servants to it.