

Holy, Holy, Holy One, guide us by the Spirit of truth to hear the Word of life you speak, and to give all glory, honor, and praise to your threefold name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

So I have to apologize. I made a mistake two weeks ago when I said we had recently had the tale of the Good Samaritan as our lectionary text. I thought we had, I know I remember an excellent sermon on it, but it wasn't one that I wrote. I had actually heard someone at the Festival of Homiletics give a sermon on this particular text.

Let's face it the parable of the Good Samaritan is one of, if not the most, well known parables of Jesus. It comes across as a basic lesson on how we as Christians should treat other people. When Jesus talks to the lawyer; and I should point out that the term lawyer is synonymous with the term scribe, or basically someone who not only knew how to write, but also knew the scriptures and laws well enough that they could write up contracts and other important legal documents, Jesus asked him what the scriptures say regarding what to do to inherit eternal life. The lawyer replies with the basic summary of, "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."

Here's where things become difficult as a preacher. The message of the entirety of the Bible, when you boil it down to its essence is exactly that. Love God and love other people like you should be loved. Like one of my friends who works with kids all the time says when someone does the same thing over and over again, "There are 88 keys on the keyboard, but I like THIS one!"

I fully realize that sometimes my message can come across the same way. "There Pastor Steve goes again, talking about some sort of social justice issue again. He makes it sound like there is something I can do but doesn't give me any concrete examples." Or "I don't have the time or money to deal with that issue that he is talking about." Or "I don't agree that the issue that he is using as an example is a good one, because there are nuances that he is not addressing. He makes it sound black and white, but there are shades of gray in there." Or maybe it's the opposite of that, "He presents the issue as having gray areas, but I believe it is black and white; and I don't agree with him."

The other problem is that we get burned out constantly hearing about horrible things in the world, things that seem to be way out of our control. An example would be the refugee detention crisis. We aren't anywhere near the border, so it's not like we can grab some signs and protest outside the gates. The facilities are turning away donations from concerned citizens, so sending toothbrushes, toys, diapers, and what not isn't going to help. Calling your senator and representative are options, but not going to make you really feel like you're doing something productive and valuable. There are legal organizations that are trying to help, but even if we are willing or able to send money to one of these organization, it doesn't feel like we are doing all that much. Some people feel that they come to church to take a break from all the problems of the world, and they don't want to hear about all that stuff in church anyway. Other folks feel very discouraged and helpless hearing about all the problems, and still others don't agree that these are our problem at all and don't want to hear about them period.

But let's set all of that aside for a minute and pull back a bit and look at this text a little closer. Let's see what the context of this story is telling us. Jesus starts out his parable by saying that a man was going from Jerusalem to Jericho. Maps sometimes just don't explain the situation well. The quickest route between these two cities was very treacherous. There is a large difference in elevation between the two places. The trail went through many areas that were

harsh and there were not good places to stop for a rest. It was so wild that many bandit groups would hide out in the area and attack travelers. There were many good spots for ambushes, yet it was still the fastest route between the two cities, so many folks risked it.

Although Jesus doesn't specify it, the assumption is that the man who is attacked by the robbers is Jewish. He is stripped, beaten, and left for dead. As he lies there two men of prominence walk by him. Both of them are related to the Temple and the assumption is that they both understand the Law very well and would be expected to obey it. Of course, obeying it would mean that they were inconvenienced. They may be late to whatever destination they were heading to. They might end up becoming ritually unclean and must cleanse themselves again before going into the Temple. Or worst of all, this could be some sort of trap and they would also be attacked and maybe even killed. Jesus does not give us the reason that they pass this man by, just that they do.

Jesus tells the rest of his parable and then asks the lawyer who he thought acted like the man's neighbor. The lawyer cannot even say it was the Samaritan. Instead he says, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus' use of the Samaritan is important to the story. I've mentioned before how the Samaritans and the Jews did not get along, but perhaps I didn't express this in clear enough terms. Samaritans and Jews shared a religious and ethnic heritage. They both claim to be descended from Jacob. They both follow Torah and have similar scripture. The difference being that the Samaritans worshipped God on the hilltops and not at the Temple. The Samaritans also claim that the Jews had changed the scriptures from the originals.

I would compare this schism to the Reformation, the splitting of the Catholic and Protestant churches; with similar antipathy towards each other, and even violence. This lawyer can't bring himself to even say the word Samaritan because of his hatred and disgust of "those" people.

One commentator says this would be the equivalent of a modern-day Jesus telling the story of an Al Qaida or ISIS member stopping and helping an American. That's how radical this story is. That is a pretty big deal. This is the idea that your worst enemy is to be considered your neighbor. Nobody ever said being a true Christian would be easy.

The sermon I talked about at the beginning of this was by Traci Blackmon. She made an important point that I want to paraphrase a bit. That point being that God wants us to do the loving action that is most needed right in front of us. She tweaked the story and put it into different terms for us, and although I can't phrase this exactly the way she put it, I can give you the idea that she used.

What if that first person who went by was very upset upon seeing the beaten man. He decided to stop in Jerusalem at where the Roman army was and demand that they patrol that section of road more often. Judea was supposed to be under the Pax Romana (Roman Peace) after all. Certainly that is a good deed isn't it?

The second man also was upset about what he saw, but he was too worried about his own safety and comfort to help the man. But when he got to Jerusalem he talked to a bunch of his friends and colleagues and they formed a community group that brought a petition to the governor demanding that a better road be built between Jerusalem and Jericho. One that was straighter and had fewer places for bandits to ambush people. And maybe they could even add in a rest stop or two on the way with wells dug to provide water for weary travelers.

These all sound like good things, don't they? Maybe these guys aren't so bad after all? Except for one thing. None of these things are going to help that guy who is lying in the ditch back on that road. Community activism and trying to make the big systematic changes are

important, but if we try to do them instead of helping someone with the immediate need we are missing the point of the parable.

Giving money to the food shelf, or to any number of non-profit agencies is beneficial, but if we then pass by the guy on the street corner who needs a coat and a hot meal right now, we are falling short of what Jesus is getting at.

Making the big changes in society and the world are noble pursuits and should be encouraged. That is a way for us to help bring forth the Kingdom of God. But let's face it; that can feel overwhelming, draining, and sometimes even hopeless. It doesn't mean we just give up, but God understands that we can't fight the big fight all the time. But there are little things that we can do. Little things that take almost no real effort at all. Things like what we saw in the video this morning. Things like a quick helping hand, a smile, even an acknowledgement of someone else's difficulty. Sometimes it's the little changes and the little things that make all the difference.

Who's the Christians neighbor? Everyone is, near or far, no matter what race, or religion, or any other distinguishing characteristic, even those that we don't approve of, even those that we may "hate." We may not come into contact with a diversity of people here in our little corner of the State, but we can make a difference in the lives of the people we do come into contact with; and that is exactly what God wants us to do. Amen