

INTRODUCTION TO THE DAY-

On this fifth Sunday after Pentecost we hear the familiar-to-us parable of the Good Samaritan. The church is invited to ask “who is our neighbour”—hopefully for reasons different from the critic who asks it of Jesus in the first place.

Luke 10:25-37

25Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” 26He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” 27He answered, “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 neighbour as yourself.” 28And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.” 29But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbour?” 30Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. 31Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. 32So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. 34He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. 35The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ 36Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” 37He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.

SERMON:

Verbal tennis matches in Jesus' day were valued as a teaching tool. Frequently, public honour and esteem were at stake to win or lose. A legal scholar thinks he's got the verbal equivalent of the overhead smash to put the set away when he asks Jesus, "*and who is my neighbour?*"

So Jesus just throws it out there. That's what the word *parable* means, after all...to toss it out there. Parables work off of misdirection. We're lulled in to a story we think we know. The plot swerves sideways often in scandalous ways and the parable jolts us into thinking differently and hopefully acting differently.

The lawyer is aghast for a whole lot of reasons; including that the hero of the story is a Samaritan. Do we call the parable the Good Samaritan out of schadenfreude at the lawyer's being scandalized?

We might be scandalized that the Samaritan risks life and limb and goes to extravagant lengths to care for a stranger. What do we do with Jesus' instruction to "go and do likewise"?

What can the church learn from the Samaritan's actions....seeing a need, taking pity, binding wounds, and providing for their healing?

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. interprets this parable as part of a speech titled "I've been to the Mountaintop". In 1968, the night before he died, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. gave the speech on the occasion of garbage collectors striking in Memphis Tennessee. Dr. King says that the pain they feel is acute and needs to be shared by a community.

For Dr. King the difference between the actions of the priest, Levite and Samaritan begins with a question they may have asked of themselves:

And so the first question that the priest asked -- 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've Been to the Mountaintop"*, April 3, 1968-printed in American Rhetoric May 3, 2021)

The late Desmond Tutu believed that acting like the Good Samaritan takes us beyond first responder mode to something more wholistic. He often said that we frequently rescue our siblings from a raging river and eventually, we'll have to walk upriver to see why they are falling in to begin with.

For churches trying to figure out their future, many ask "Who needs us?" In previous calls, we've asked people in the community what they'd miss if our church ceased to be. Some said they wouldn't notice. Frequently I read articles where people say, "Good riddance" because they've seen the church turn away from those who suffer and defend the powerful. They've seen the church shun people with judgemental attitudes and actions.

These days, we churchy people might be regarded with a suspicious similar to that which Samaritans faced in Jesus' day. We might have to own some of that. Jesus tells us to show mercy. We own that too.

Part of the church's discernment takes us from who is our neighbour to "how can we be a neighbour to those who need us"?

That's no easy question when most of us are wondering what's to become of a church that's aging and decreasing in numbers and resources. We might feel like we've been sent to clear a landfill and given a pair of tweezers to do the job.

Maybe we find comfort drawing on Jesus' stories that illustrate how God's saving and blessing the world frequently involves seeds, a pinch of salt, and sometimes unlikely, un-likeable characters.

So when we ask how do we love our neighbour, may we live that question. May God whose life and love cannot be extinguished empower us to love our neighbour as ourselves.