

Pentecost 8C (7/10/2016)

Deuteronomy 30:9-14

Psalm 25:1-10

Colossians 1:1-14

Luke 10:25-37

We are more like the priest and the Levite than the Good Samaritan. And, we are most like the beaten traveler by the side of the road. But God is good, and sets an example of compassionate self-giving for the sake of healing and new life. Human compassion is but a reflection of God's own boundless compassion.

Weeks like this, I'm tempted to just read the Gospel and sit down.

Really, how can my meager words add value to such a biblical treasure? The parable of the Good Samaritan is renowned for a reason. It's a compelling image of human relationship at its best, a narrative benchmark for true love. In one fell swoop, Jesus' famous story collapses the boundaries that separate us and calls us to act with spontaneous kindness toward anyone in need. A man went out of his way to care for an injured stranger. Go and do likewise.

But, like most passages in scripture, the parable of the Good Samaritan has more to offer to those who are willing to take a closer look. Upon first inspection, we might hear the parable as a simple morality tale, the message of which boils down to something like, "It's nice to be nice." But this interpretation leaves something to be desired. There's something breathtaking about the parable, isn't there? – something transformative. There has to be more to it than just an ethical lesson.

We might begin to dig deeper by observing the other characters in the story. The priest and the Levite are much like the legal expert whose question – “And who is my neighbor?” – inspires the parable in the first place. These are all religious insiders, those whom we would expect to behave well according to religious law. These are the ones whose status in the eyes of God and the community is unparalleled. These are the “upright citizens” in Jesus’ context. Yet, the priest and the Levite are precisely those who neglect to love the Lord their God with all their heart by loving others as themselves.

Maybe the priest was late to a council meeting, the old joke goes, and maybe the Levite had important religious business waiting. In any case, the religious insiders go out of their way to avoid the half-dead man by the side of the road. It could be the sight of blood, or the helplessness of his situation, or the stark reminder that they, too, are in danger on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. For whatever reason, the wounded man’s plight is objectionable to the priest and the Levite, and they keep a safe distance.

Can we see ourselves in them? How often do we pass by people in need, justifying ourselves with a laundry list of excuses? We don’t have time. We have more pressing responsibilities. It’s uncomfortable. Our natural inclination is to recoil from suffering, and especially the suffering of a stranger, and so to guard against the risk of having to bear his burden with

him. If we're honest, we recognize that we're more like the priest and the Levite than the Good Samaritan.

But perhaps even more, we are like the beaten traveler by the side of the road. This life is a lot like the journey from Jerusalem to Jericho, fraught with hazards and undesirable outcomes. We are aware that every new step in the journey carries with it the risk of pain and loss, so we arm ourselves against uncertainty. But self-made security is a myth, and at any moment we are liable to fall victim to circumstance and find ourselves stripped, beaten, and left for dead.

And when the unthinkable happens, the world seems to pass us by on the other side of the road. People have lives of their own, pressing responsibilities of their own, worries of their own, so our suffering is often a lonely burden. But even as the world passes us by, **the wonder of the incarnation is that God looks with compassion on our suffering and joins us in it.** Renowned author, Henri Nouwen, captures the essence of this central Christian confession:

God's compassion is not something abstract or indefinite, but a concrete, specific gesture in which God reaches out to us. In Jesus Christ we see the fullness of God's compassion. To us, who cry out from the depth of our brokenness for a hand that will touch us, an arm that can embrace us, lips that will kiss us, a word that speaks to us here and now, and a heart that is not afraid of our fears and tremblings; to us, who feel our own pain as no other human being feels it, has felt it, or ever will feel it and who are always waiting for someone who dares to come close – to us a person has come who could truly say, "I am with you." Jesus Christ, who is God-with-us, has come to us in the freedom of love, not needing

to experience our human condition but freely choosing to do so out of love.¹

Jesus is Immanuel, God-with-us, even in the worst of our pain and loneliness. He is God's compassion poured out like oil and wine on our open wounds; he is God's loving kindness in the flesh.

So, maybe we should start referring to the parable of the Good Samaritan instead as the parable of the Good God. **We are not predisposed to join each other in suffering, but God is. God is fundamentally good, and in the life and death of Jesus sets an example of compassionate self-giving for the sake of healing and new life.**

Human compassion is but a reflection of God's own boundless compassion. It means being swept up into what God has already poured into our lives for the sake of the world God imagines for us.² It means participating in the very love of God, the love that sustains us even when we suffer, and the love on which our hope finally rests, "For," in the words of a beloved hymn, "the love of God is broader than the measures of our mind; and the heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully kind."³

¹ *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life*, 21.

² See James A. Wallace, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 3, 239.

³ Frederick W. Faber, "There's a Wideness in God's Mercy," *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Assembly Edition, #587.