**Reflection on the Parable of the Good Samaritan**

**St. Barnabas Church**

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**One of the things that has always impressed me about Jesus is that he was a terrific story teller. But he was more than a raconteur; he was an inspired teacher who sought to direct his listeners in a gentle but direct manner to embrace behaviors that would be pleasing to God. In the four gospels, 46 such stories are related and if you count the ones repeated in one or more gospels, the total soars to 62.**

**For many of us, Jesus’s stories or parables are what we remember most clearly. They are the texts and topics of many a Sunday School class. They are the source of many life lessons. When someone talks of the widow’s mite or the pearl of great price or the gift of talents or finding lost sheep, we quickly are connected to the Bible and the stories that Jesus told. However, it is easy to oversimplify the meaning of such stories and to turn them into Christian versions of Aesop’s Fables that can be reduced to a one-line moral.**

**This certainly is the risk with parable we just heard in Luke’s Gospel. We could conclude that Jesus is just saying “Be nice to everyone” and move on with our lives. I am pretty sure that this does not do justice to the parable or reflect the entire teaching that Jesus had in mind both in his own time and today.**

**Let’s take a minute to consider the players in the opening scene. First there is Jesus who has been roaming the countryside teaching and healing. According to Luke, he has sensed that the final stage of his life and ministry was approaching and, as Luke says in Chapter 9 Verse 51, “When the days drew near for him to be received up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.” Interestingly, this journey took him to the village of the Samaritans who refused to welcome him and when his disciples, James and John, saw this they asked if they should call down a lightning strike to punish the people. Jesus rebuked them and they set out for another village.**

**Second, there is the Lawyer. This fellow was not someone who wrote wills or represented people in court. Rather he was an expert Old Testament scholar and his opening question to Jesus was designed to put Jesus on the spot. He suspected and perhaps hoped that Jesus might come up with some new guidelines that somehow contradicted those established in the Old Testament and thus cast himself in a bad light. Jesus turns the tables on him by asking him what is written in the Jewish law. The lawyer answers the question accurately by saying, “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.” Jesus’s response is the equivalent of “Right on! You nailed it!” And he adds, “Do this and you will live.” The key word here is “Do”. The lawyer was prepared to quote, discuss and debate, but he was not prepared to “do”.**

**We can sort of hear the Lawyer whisper “Drat! That’s not what I was after. Time to regroup.” He then asks a second question which he hopes might give him some wiggle room. Maybe, he thinks, I can make the “doing” a bit easier by limiting those people whom I have to consider my neighbor. Jesus’s response is to tell the story of the Good Samaritan.**

**Here again we have an important cast of characters. First are the robbers. They clearly are bad guys and are just a given in the parable. Second is the victim. We have no way of knowing for sure whether he was a Jew or a foreigner. All we know is that he was seriously injured and near death. Third we have the Priest and the Levite, both members of the Jewish religious establishment and both of whom pass by the victim without rendering aid. Finally, we have the Samaritan, an individual that the Priest and Levite would have sneered at as being socially and spiritually inferior. Yet he is the one who shows compassion and undertakes the care of the victim. And we should remember that Jesus himself recently had been rejected by the Samaritans when he visited their village.**

**In this brief story, Jesus creates a situation in which the letter of the law is in conflict with the command to love one’s neighbor. The Priest and the Levite can cite religious rules against touching a dead body or contaminating themselves with blood as their excuse for not rendering aid, although Jesus does not tell us why they pass by on the other side of the road. However, when push comes to shove, even the Lawyer has to agree that the Samaritan is the neighborly one, although he does so, figuratively holding his nose, and saying “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus then tells him, “Go and do likewise”. Again the key word is “do”.**

**Jesus makes it clear that following just a part of the “great commandment” is not enough. Loving God, no matter how faithfully, does not give one the license to pick and choose one’s neighbors. This is not an either/or proposition. The kindness and compassion shown by the Samaritan reminds us of the unconditional love that God shows for each of us and all our neighbors.**

**I think Jesus made it pretty clear what he thought was necessary to follow the Great Commandment in his time. Perhaps a more germane question for us to consider is what it means for us today. As the lawyer came to realize, it is not easy and it is often an inconvenient task.**

**Certainly for me, the first half of the commandment is enough of a challenge. I am pretty sure that I have plenty of room for improvement. I suspect most of us do. It is pretty easy for me to be a slacker when it comes to loving God with all my heart and mind and soul and strength. In fact, I am not exactly sure what that would entail. Fortunately, I believe, God recognizes that I am apt to fall short and He still repays my clumsy effort with acceptance and love.**

**Figuring out who our neighbors are is a trickier task. The Priest and the Levite lived in a comparatively small world. We, in contrast, live in a global universe with information about every event around the world. Nevertheless, we too often find it easy to narrow the field of neighbors to just those people we like or just those people who are like us. We often use a variety of screens to keep ourselves comfortable when we decide who are neighbors are. Like the Priest and the Levite, we can find all sorts of excuses for why we cannot embody the love that Jesus requires: work, family, social or economic difference, embarrassment, distance, and the like.**

**Often we just say that those in need are “in our thoughts and prayers” (the response of Congress after the Orlando massacre) or we write a check to some relief agency that is doing the real, hands-on work of helping. Such gestures are better than ignoring the problems, but they do not compare to the commitment of people who move out of their comfort zone and out of their neighborhood to reach out to those in need. Think of the volunteers on 9/11; think of the volunteers in Fort McMurray; think of the people who work with the homeless; and think of those who travel across the world to offer help and support to people who live on the thinnest edge of survival.**

**With all the information and technology at our disposal, helping our neighbors could easily become a full-time job. Here’s where things get challenging. Do we throw up our hands in despair or do we strive to find a way to love as many as possible? I would suggest that we start small and gradually broaden our efforts as we gain confidence. Like the pebble dropped in a pond that sends ever-widening ripples, we can start close to home with a family member, a friend, a neighbor in need, or a school or nursing home that needs volunteer support. We can then move out to our community, then our region, our nation and then the world. As we practice loving our neighbor, we get better at loving our neighbor and we find that we have the ability to love more widely.**

**No, we probably cannot get to the point of loving everybody and I am not sure we should. It seems to me that the key to living today into the second part of the Great Commandment is to do the best we can for as many as we can. Certainly it is okay to send our thoughts and prayers or to send a check, but the most important step we have to take is to try to do something. That’s what Jesus told the lawyer and that is what he is telling us.**