

McCabe United Methodist Church
February 28, 2010
Luke 10:30-37
“The Bad Samaritan”
by Pastor Gary Walters

Our scripture lesson this morning comes from Luke 10, and I am going to start at verse 30 and read through 37.

“In reply, Jesus said ‘A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down this same road and when he saw the man he passed by on the other side. So too a Levite, when he came to the place, saw him, and passed by on the other side of the road. But, a Samaritan, as he traveled, came to where the man was and when he saw him he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine, then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. Look after him, he said, and when I return I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have. Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers.’ The expert in the law replied, ‘The one who had mercy on him.’ Jesus replied ‘Go and do likewise.’”

The word of God, for the people of God, thanks be to God.

This story of the Good Samaritan has really become a part of our culture so whether someone is churched or not and they might put a heading on a newspaper article “The Good Samaritan” everyone knows what it means. They may not realize that it comes from the parables of Jesus, but we understand what it means when someone is being a good Samaritan. Well, that kind of familiarity is great, but it also has its dangers because when we hear the story then we might get that glazed eyes, far-away kind of look, my mind can wander wherever it wants because I have already heard this and I know it. Well, don’t do that; because, there is some really good stuff in this story and I think we have not yet exhausted the possibilities of what Jesus was getting at.

We fail to realize how controversial and really how offensive this story would have been to Jesus’ first audience. To set the context a little bit, there was a lawyer who came questioning Jesus and you have to understand that lawyers in that day, at least Jewish lawyers, were experts in the Hebrew law so they were a mix of pastor and scholar and lawyer in terms of our context. But, this guy knew his stuff pretty well and he comes to question Jesus but Jesus immediately turns it around. The man asks “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” and Jesus says “What does the scripture say?” He replies, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, strength and love your neighbor as yourself.”, which was kind of the expected summary of the

law in that day and age. Well Jesus says “Great, you have the right answer, go and live this.” But the lawyer, didn’t know when to quit or wanted to justify himself or maybe just human nature, wanted to win down the law of God to something a little more manageable and so he gets right to the heart of the matter, “Who is my neighbor?”.

You see, it would be really convenient to follow the law of God, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, strength and your neighbor as yourself” if our neighbors were people that were easy to get along with and easy to love and easy to help out. But, not everybody is like that and so okay, who is my neighbor and who do I have to serve and who can I get away with ignoring? Lets face it, that whole idea of love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, strength, is abstract enough that if we fail on some point we might be able to cover or get away with it; but when it comes to loving our neighbor, that is pretty concrete and out there for everyone to see. So, the lawyer wanted to cut it down.

When Jesus comes with this story, and often when we talk about this story of the Good Samaritan, we look at the priest and the Levite who were too “busy, busy, dreadfully busy...” so that they just kept right on going. There were some reasons, other possible reasons, why they just passed by, but I take offense at that a little bit, but Jesus gave us the story so we will just have to live with it. Then, I’ve heard this passage preached from that perspective of the Samaritan, who despite the fact that he was a Samaritan and this man who was waylaid, and laying half dead on the side of the road was a Jew, and the animosity between those two groups, despite all of that stopped and had compassion on this individual. There are great sermons on both sides of that. But I wonder what it was like for the victim.

Now, you might think, “Well, he’s just glad to be alive, that anybody, that somebody would stop”, but I’m not sure about that. I remember this scene pretty graphically. Somebody had come to me in the course of seeking pastoral counsel and really laid their heart out and the conflict they were having with this person and some of the stuff they had done that just wasn’t good, well, anyway, all of a sudden I said “what you really need to do is go and talk to this person and then ask for forgiveness” and their response was rather immediate “I’d, rather die.”. Well, I don’t think they meant that literally, but there is a point where we don’t want to have to, especially with somebody we’ve had conflict with or somebody we don’t like, we don’t want to have to make ourselves vulnerable to them. We don’t want to ask any “favor” from them. We don’t want to receive anything from them at all. It’s too humiliating, too....., we just don’t want to do it.

Well, I wonder if this victim was feeling something of that; because he didn’t know about good Samaritans, all he knew about were bad Samaritans. And, frankly, bad Samaritans were a lot easier to deal with because he didn’t have to change his prejudices or assumptions or any of

that, but a good Samaritan was a whole different deal and much harder, much harder, to deal with. So, I wonder how it was for this victim.

I'm reminded of a story. My first appointment was in White River, South Dakota. Well, White River, compared to here, is like the tropics, but it's still the Dakotas, it could get very cold there. It was one of those days, it was a nice, January morning and I hopped in my car to run down to Mission to do worship down there, Sunday morning. Well, I was dressed for Sunday morning, not 15-20 mile an hour winds and 5 degrees outside. So I got about three miles down the road and my car sputters and dies. I'm kind of in trouble. Dress pants aren't really all that warm and I did have my coat with me, I wasn't completely stupid, but I did not have a hat and boy I regretted that greatly; because, like I said, it was cold and it was windy. I had a deadline to keep. You know if I ran back to town (and no cell phone) I could still make it to Mission in time to do the sermon and keep the routine. So, I hopped out and I started jogging back to town, but it was just too cold. I got about halfway there and I was seriously thinking about crawling into a culvert because it was so cold. My fingers and toes and ears were absolutely dying. I was seriously thinking about frostbite and hypothermia and cold like only the Dakotas could deliver.

In that time that I was jogging cars would go whizzing by, I don't know who they were, but they didn't stop. It just got to that point where I was kind of desperate, I was like, help, anybody, help; although I'm not sure I meant it because about that time over the hill comes a car full of about eight people. Well there probably weren't eight but it was full, and I remember this very graphically, it was kind of a great big sedan-type of vehicle and the vinyl top was peeling off and flapping around as they pulled up and who would get out but some of the gentleman who often hunted the streets out in White River to bum a dollar or a sandwich or whatever. So, normally it's just like "ugh, I don't want to talk to these people", because, it's like, they spend all of their money on binge drinking and then want me to give them a dollar so they can buy lunch---boy there is a hard balance between being Christ and tough love, but that's another issue. But, they were the ones who stopped. Not only did they stop and offer help, but the guy in the front seat who was the only one besides the driver who had any elbow room at all said, "Oh, Pastor, you get in front, I'll climb in back with the others." So, sure enough he climbs in back with the other four people who were already there and they let me in and run me home and they were extremely gracious. The car smelled of the alcohol they had been drinking the night before (makes you kind of wonder how safe it was to get in the car with them, but better than freezing to death) but they were the ones who helped. How humbling. Why couldn't it have been one of my parishioners coming in for worship or why couldn't it be one of the other pastors who had the same circuit I did on that run who stopped, but no, it was these guys that helped. Anyway, it changed my relationship with that group of folks dramatically and really gave me an appreciation for God's sense of humor and how he sends

help. It helped break down some of my prejudices. I am guessing that the Good Samaritan's actions had something of that kind of an affect on this victim.

Well, the track from Jerusalem to Jericho is 20 miles. It drops about 3500 feet. Jerusalem sits at about 3200 foot elevation, Jericho sits at 300 feet below sea level. This is a treacherous road, to say the least. Even with the modern paved road that is there now, when Laura and I were in the Holy Land we drove that. It's winding and there are little canyons that run up. It was not uncommon for thieves to hide in those cracks and crevices and jump out and waylay loan travelers. Normally people would travel that in large numbers, for safety sake, but for whatever reason, this gentleman was alone and fell victim to these ruffians.

I suggest that all of us are on something of that kind of a trek; because, life is dangerous. It's not a matter of if, but when we get waylaid by ruffians. We will give them different names. I think of those moments of despair or loneliness or fear or lust or anger or defeat, everything we could label as the kingdom of evil. And whether it comes in the form of a doctor's report or being called into the boss's office, or the intimidation received from a classmate or a coworker or the ultimatum from a spouse, we could just keep adding, and adding, and adding to that list. But, there are those moments, and we aren't literally left half dead along the side of the road but there are times when we are stuck and we cannot help ourselves. We want to make that appeal to those around us of our credentials and we've meant well, and look at all the things we've done, and we are really respectful people, it's just, you know, it's really circumstances beyond our control, or we want to save face. We want to earn the help. We want to earn the grace that we desperately need from others, which in fact makes it no grace at all. But, we want to save face. We want to save our pride. God often sends help in forms that break down our pride and that reveal to us just how vulnerable we are.

I had a mentor, a professor in seminary, Ellsworth Kalas, who gave a sermon on the Good Samaritan. He had some interesting things to say. I'd actually like to end with a paragraph that he wrote about this. "Then a third stranger comes and clearly he is a Samaritan for he carries a cross. And remember the ancient scripture says cursed is anyone who hangs on a tree, and still worse as he draw near we remember a description from long ago, 'He was despised and rejected, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. He was despised and we esteemed him not.', a man, a Samaritan indeed. But he volunteers to help. We try to explain 'I can pay my own way, I'm a deserving person, you know' but the stranger answers, no one can purchase what I offer, nor can anyone deserve it. But I shall be glad to give it to you and he lifts us to his donkey, a wondrously awkward beast, called grace. But you and I don't want that kind of help. The Samaritan embarrasses us by his very kindness and mercy; because he won't let us pay our way, because he isn't impressed by our credentials. It is a gift that we can never, in any way, repay. Sometimes we think we'd rather die in our lostness than to humble ourselves to receive this stranger's gift. I have a feeling the dying man in Jesus' parable must have felt that way

when his help came by way of a despised Samaritan and I know full well that you and I draw back when God's eternal Samaritan extends his offer. We accept him only when our need is so desperate that we must accept him. Only when we confess that we are powerless to help ourselves and only when we see what love this divine Samaritan offers. Only then are we willing to be lifted onto this donkey called grace. Well lifted onto that donkey called grace and taken out of that valley of the shadow of death and into the kingdom of light."

Would you pray with me? Lord we thank you for your grace. Remind us again that we don't earn it but that you give it and that often we will experience grace in this life through unlikely sources and help that to knock down our prejudices that we might be humbled before you, especially Lord, that we would be in our fellow human being, no matter how different or rough around the edges they might be, but that we might see a child created in your image. For both when we receive help from your hand through them and both when we have the opportunity to be your hands to those folks. Help us, we pray, Amen.