

Sermon – July 11, 2010
The Rev. Lisa Rotchford Golden

From our opening collect “grant that your people may know and understand what things they ought to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to accomplish them”...
to the emphatic insistence of an inquisitive lawyer in our Gospel “what can I DO to inherit eternal life...”
to the sequence hymn we just completed “Rise up ye Saints of God!” (exclamation points for emphasis)...

We like to “do”.
We like to “accomplish”.
We like to be God’s people of action.

And today’s Gospel, which is probably one of the most famous and well-known of Luke’s parables, the Good Samaritan, calls us to act. But like the answers that Jesus gives his inquisitive pupil, the ways in which we are called to action may surprise us.

I would like to encourage us this morning to look at this well-known parable from a journalistic perspective. To help frame the story, let’s ask ourselves the 5 W’s (& 1 H) questions.
Who is this story really about?
What lessons are we to learn?
Where and when can we apply its message?
How do we carry it out?
And the all important “Why?”

We know this story since our childhood Catechism and Sunday School days. But do we know what role we are to play in the story? If we were to act it out, as I recall many a Sunday school curriculum encourages, who would we want to be? Who are we called to be?

Well, we are called to be the Good Samaritan, aren’t we? Well, yes, we are told directly from the lips of Jesus we are called to imitate the mercy that is shown by the Samaritan in the story. But is that the role we are to play, or the action that we are to act out?

I invite us to look at this parable this morning as if we are called to be role of the traveller on the road. Remember, this parable is told as Jesus told us in the Gospel 2 weeks ago with his face set toward Jerusalem. We are travellers with him on a dangerous road going to a city where, with the benefit of 2 centuries of hindsight, we know the cross awaits. Can it be, as one of our first Christian theologians, Origen suggests in the 2nd century, down through the centuries in the writings of Saints Ambrose and Augustine, that the Good Samaritan represents Christ himself? He is the one who reaches out who risks his life in a dangerous situation to mercifully, compassionately save the wounded traveller.

None of us likes to think of ourselves as a victim. A person lying on the side of the road -- beaten down by the hazards that are very real in this human life. Yet this story encourages us to know that when we find ourselves at various times in our life alone, afraid, perhaps feeling like a stranger in a strange land -- we are never alone. We have been given a gift of salvation that reaches out of the confines of strict religious laws (as represented by the 2 institutional religious figures in the story) and we can receive this gift knowing that we did not need to, in fact we can’t, earn by our deeds or misdeeds. Our all embracing salvation that wraps its arms around us on whatever stage of the journey we are on -- whether we find ourselves walking upright, with the assistance of a cane, or maybe we find ourselves without work, without hope, with broken relationships, with...(you fill in your blank)...and that all embracing salvation is a gift that lifts us up, tends to us and lets us know that we are to be still and know God is the great I am.

We are to be still as he carries us on his horse to the nearby inn. And to be a recipient of this eternal, life-saving, life-giving gift.

Now contrary to what many children believe around Christmastime or birthdays especially, receiving gifts is hard. To be the recipient of a gift is often harder than being the "giver"; to be the recipient of God's mercy can be overwhelming. But to allow oneself to truly receive God's mercy and compassion, then we are given the power to share it with everyone else we meet along our road.

So the "who" of the story is that we are the recipient of the "what" God's mercy and compassion. When we allow ourselves to let our hearts be mended, as the beaten travellers beatings healed, by Christ's/the Good Samaritan's act of mercy, then we know what mercy is and can share it with those that have not known it.

To have "mercy", to be merciful, is something that comes from within. It is a behavior that generally can not be compelled by outside forces -- like the "law" that the lawyer in our parable keeps referring to. A famous literary example is from *The Merchant of Venice* when Portia asks Shylock to show mercy. He asks, On what compulsion, must I? She responds:

The quality of mercy is not strained.
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.

...

It is an attribute of God himself;
And earthly power doth then show like God's
When mercy seasons justice.

God's merciful gift of eternal life given to us through Jesus Christ empowers us to go out and show mercy and compassion to a world that does not know it.

So the "w" where is...everywhere.

The "w" when? Anytime. And when we are called to exhibit mercy to another is often when we least expect it. Its when we're tired, and frustrated and maybe not feeling at our best; maybe not quite beaten down like the traveller on the road, but maybe not far from it. And we are called to show mercy and compassion.

"How?" you may ask. (And it is the "H" of our parable equation.) By following the one commandment that Jesus gave us that encompasses all the Old Testament 10: to love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. And to love your neighbor as yourself.

This parable also speaks to not just "who is my neighbor?" as the lawyer asks. But as Jesus responds "To whom must I become a neighbor?" Jesus answers this early on in our Gospel reading with HOW we are to proceed in this world showing mercy where there is none; shining light in the darkness; and offering the gift of eternal life that we have been given by offering Christ to those in the world that do not know him. The Great Commission is found in the final chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel but also in the heart of this parable -- our neighborhood is to the ends of the earth. All are our neighbors and to whom we must be their neighbor.

Which answers the final "W" -- why? The eternal question that all humans ask, including our inquisitive lawyer in our Gospel reading. Why do we allow ourselves to receive the gift of mercy, offering it to all we meet, at all times in all places, by putting ourselves out there letting our hearts and souls perhaps get

hurt and broken and trampled upon, and our minds and strength to get tired? Because He first loved us. He, the Good Samaritan Christ, first offered the ultimate costly demonstration of unexpected love. He risked and lost his life on the cross for us. He lost his life so that we gained ours, forever. Without “earning” it, inheritance is a gift, it can’t be “earned”.

Kenneth Baily, a modern day theologian who has done some insightful historical analysis in a book entitled *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, has an interesting way of helping us understand the cultural nuances of the Good Samaritan’s action. Imagine this story taking place in the American west in the storied 19th century of the cowboys and indians. An American Indian rides into town with a scalped but living cowboy on the back of his horse. He tends to the cowboy’s needs and arranges for the cowboy’s care. When that Indian walks down that saloon steps, does he get out of town alive?

The wounded man in our Gospel and the wounded cowboy in Bailey’s tale will never be the same again because of the Samaritan’s action. But did the Samaritan make it out of town alive? Did the Indian?

Jesus is demonstrating a part of the meaning of his own passion by showing us he saves us and gives up his life so that we may live. Because of the cross and Jesus’ resurrection we are Alive in Christ! Unlike the lawyer who is trying to justify how he lives, we need no “justification”. If we own our inheritance now, we can be that poor person attacked on the road; we can also be the generous one that offers mercy and compassion. We are given eternal life no matter what we “do” or where we are in life.

How do we inherit eternal life? the lawyer in all of us asks. By living into the knowledge of our loving Father and life-giving Savior who knows our heart, tends our mind, nourishes our soul and is our strength.

In Jesus name, we pray, Amen.

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