

A SERMON FROM ST. MARK'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

NEW CANAAN, CONNECTICUT

The Good Lawyer

*Preached by the Reverend Anne F. C. Richards, Senior Assistant
7 Pentecost, July 11, 2010, Luke 10:25-37*

Some stories in the Bible acquire names for themselves. Others don't. Today's story has a name: The Good Samaritan. I suppose getting a name testifies to a story's popularity, but I think the name can also function as a kind of label, indicating that the story has become hardened or set in the popular imagination, which means that the name itself can be misleading. I think that's the case here, because even though the story features a "good" Samaritan, it's not just about the Samaritan at all. In fact, I think it's about someone else's goodness.

But let's start at the beginning. In the passage preceding today's gospel, Jesus has observed that the wise and the educated often don't understand what innocent babies do. And so a smart-alecky lawyer who has heard him say this thinks to himself, "Well, I'll just show him!" and he pops up and with a kind of false respectfulness he says, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life? What are the rules? What are the requirements?" And like a good teacher, Jesus throws the question back on him and his expertise and says, "You're the lawyer. What does the law say?" And the lawyer gives it to him straight from the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy. "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." Note that the lawyer answers his own question. And so Jesus says

"You're right. That's the answer. Now go do it." The story could have ended right there.

But the lawyer won't drop it. "And who is my neighbor?" He reminds me of some of the 8th graders I had as English students. I'd assign them a five-page paper and the hands would shoot up in the air: "Five pages double-spaced or single-spaced? One-inch margins or two-inch margins? Can we count the title page?" The lawyer is doing the same thing. He asks for a strict definition of neighbor because he wants to see how much he can get away with and still obey the law. Interestingly, the consensus at the time was that "neighbor" meant any fellow Jew. It was not broader than that or narrower than that. But the lawyer wants to make sure. He wants to know exactly what his duty is.

And so Jesus tells him a story about a Samaritan. As I'm sure you know, Samaria was a region in the north of Israel and its people, the Samaritans, were related to the Jews ethnically and religiously. But on account of their so-called "mixed blood" as a result of the Assyrian conquest of the north of Israel hundreds of years before, they were by the time of Jesus considered to be heretics, social outcasts, and religiously unclean people. They did not worship at Jerusalem. No proper Jew would have anything to do with a Samaritan. It is difficult to make a modern parallel to this, though the caste system in India is similar to it in terms of the strict, religiously

driven boundaries it sets up between people and the strong taboo about breaking those boundaries.

The man who has been stripped, beaten, and left for dead on the side of the road is almost certainly a mainline Jew, since the story suggests that he has made a visit to Jerusalem and is now returning home to Jericho. Two men see him but they pass him by, and these guys have lived on in history as devils on account of their lack of empathy and action. But remember, one is a priest, the other a Levite. These are not ethically dead people. If they had touched the injured man, they would have been instantly rendered unclean in terms of the law and thus unable to fulfill their religious responsibilities for the people at the temple in Jerusalem. They are caught between two duties: the duty to neighbor, and the duty to community. They chose the latter, and it's not a completely crazy choice. While we might judge the choice an unnecessary one - Why can't you honor both your duty to neighbor and your duty to community at the same time? - this is not what the law allowed these two men at this point in time. Many situations in life present us with choices like this. But I think the main take-away here is that two law-abiding people are prevented by the law itself from fulfilling one of the commands of the law. And that's the problem with the law. It always comes back to bite you, no matter how hard you try. You can't ever really win at the law.

The Samaritan doesn't have this problem. Being the lowest of the low confers a kind of freedom. When he sees the injured man, he is moved with pity, an expression that is used elsewhere in Luke to refer to Jesus himself. Moved with pity. He breaks the taboo and he dresses the man's wounds himself, and he brings him to an inn and - this is the part I love! - he stays overnight with the guy to make sure he's going to live, and then the next morning he gives the inn keeper license to spend whatever he needs to to take care of

the man and then he even promises to come back to make sure everything is OK. He goes way, way beyond the call of duty. He is not made unclean by coming into contact with blood because he's already unclean by virtue of who he is. He can do what he does because he has nothing to lose.

And so Jesus puts it to the lawyer: "Which one of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" And the lawyer says, "The one who showed him mercy." Once again, the lawyer answers his own question. Once again, the answer he was seeking outside himself he has found inside himself. And - did you catch this? - he doesn't say "The Samaritan who showed him mercy." He says "The one who showed him mercy." He doesn't use the label "Samaritan" with its ugly racial and religious connotations. On some level, he knows it's about one human being helping another human being. And so the lawyer's heart begins to open up.

Father Peter mentioned to me yesterday that over the years many surveys have shown that the Good Samaritan is everyone's favorite Bible story. That's why there are so many hospitals called "Good Samaritan" and why we so often read stories in the newspaper with headlines like "Good Samaritan helps victim of mugging get help." The phrase "good Samaritan" has come to mean someone who out of the goodness of his or her heart goes above and beyond the call of duty to help a stranger in serious trouble.

But let's not forget: This story is also about one human being **being helped by** another human being. My dear husband reminded me of this when we were talking about this story this week. The injured man was a proper Jew. According to the law, he should not have let a Samaritan touch him - it would have made him unclean. But he let it happen because his life was at stake. And so his willingness to be helped by the hated other begins to reshape

the definition of neighbor from “Who deserves my love?” to “To whom can I show love?” It’s a two-way street. It’s not only a question about **to whom** you are a neighbor. It’s a question of whom you allow **to be a neighbor to you**. Either way, the story presents us with the ultimate question of who is to be counted as a full human being. And that questions goes right to the heart of our lives individually, as a country, as a world. Who is to be counted as a full human being?

A few years ago, while we were still living in the city, I fell under a Metro North train. I was on my way to work from our apartment in Riverdale. I was on the platform and when the doors to the train opened, I started walking quickly toward them. I was not running. I was wearing sensible shoes. I think the toe of my shoe caught just under one of those rubber dots they have on the platform for seeing-impaired people and down I went, hard. So hard that my body rolled right to the edge of the platform and into the gap and down I went. I was wedged tight, on my side, between the wall of the track and some piece of the train.

I was wearing a ski jacket and so when the people on the platform tried to grab me and lift me out, they would get me out partway but the slippery fabric made them lose their grasp several times and I’d slip back down. I could see people’s shoes on the platform but nothing else. A woman was crying and screaming – that worried me because I thought it meant the doors were closing. All I could say was “Help.” No exclamation point, no yelling. Just a statement, “Help.” All the armamentaria of my life fell away. I was nothing except a person who needed help. And let me tell you, if Osama Bin Laden had walked by and offered to assist, I would have gladly taken him up on it.

We all need help. Most of us don’t realize how much help we need. “How are you?” “I’m fine, I’m good.” (read: I am hanging on by

a thread, my life has become unmanageable.”) “Just busy.” (read: I have no idea how my life ended up like this. I am circling the drain.”). A colleague who is a psychiatrist told me about a little 7 year old boy he met who was doing badly in school. His very upscale parents who put every single thing in their lives ahead of him while still managing to overparent him took him to this psychiatrist and after a 2 hour, \$1000 conversation, the parents had a brief exchange with the psychiatrist while the little boy roamed around the office. After they all left, the psychiatrist found a note on his desk. The little boy had left it for him. It said: “Help.”

Kids need help, not only our resources and our supervision. Elderly people need help even though sometimes even though our youth-worshipping culture infects them with a pride that prevents them from accepting it. Functioning adults need help because our work-and possession-obsessed culture is driving us into the ground. Have you seen that TV ad for Bayer aspirin? “I was the guy who was never going to have the heart attack. I thought I was invincible. But now I have an aspirin regimen, so I will never have to feel helpless again.” Good luck with that one, buddy. You may never have a heart attack, but you’ve just surrendered your humanity.

Being a true human being is about being a neighbor – someone who gives help and who accepts help. Jesus did both. I see the shadow of Jesus behind every part of this story, in the giving and the being given to. I see him in how he shows the lawyer, and us, that oftentimes the answers to our most important questions are already within us. As the Old Testament reading for today says, “The word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart.” I see him in the injured man, because Jesus too was stripped and beaten and left for dead. I see him in the Samaritan, with whom he was an object of hatred and rejection. I see him in the compassion of the Samaritan. I see Jesus’ integrity in the lawyer

himself, who at least had the guts to want eternal life and who was willing to be taught and to be transformed. And so I think the better name for this story is “The Good Lawyer.” Because God bless him, he went away a changed man, a free man.

We can change too. We all want the kind of life in which we can grow and learn to love God and our neighbor. That’s what St. Mark’s is for. Because being a Christian letting the core of goodness inside you be liberated for service to the world. The Samaritan did it, the injured man did it, even the lawyer did it. None of us has anything to lose.

“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.”

Go and do likewise.

Amen.