

Sermon – 7th Pentecost
Luke 10:25-37
July 11, 2010

“From Requiring to Relinquishing”

The interpretations of this story have characteristically run along the lines of “*love trumps law*,” “*welcome the stranger*,” “*don’t pre-judge anyone*,” and “*be a good neighbor*.” It is one of few Christian stories to have found a place in the language and symbolism of our culture. From examples of common courtesy to ones of extraordinary kindness – “*Good Samaritan*” is a label often invoked. There are statutes in virtually every state dealing with the limits of legal liability and moral obligation in cases of emergencies that bear the same name – “*Good Samaritan Laws*.” Ironic, given the fact that no where in the story is the Samaritan called “good.”

Samaritans were ethnic and religious cousins to the Jews. They shared a common ancestry, all of them descendents of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But they hated each other. Centuries before Jesus’ time, Jews and Samaritans parted company on religious practices, political control of the nation of Israel, and over time the Samaritans intermarried with people of other cultures and religions. Of them the ancient Jewish teacher Ben Sirach wrote, “*He who eats the bread of the Samaritans is like to one that eats the flesh of swine...they are those stupid people living at Shechem.*” Daily in the temple in Jerusalem, Jewish prayers were offered up asking God to not grant Samaritans eternal life.

In this story, Jesus tells us that a man was “*going down*” from Jerusalem, the “*Holy City*”, set high on a hill, to Jericho, a city still referred to as “*the lowest city on earth*” because it sits nearly 900 feet below sea level, just miles from the Dead Sea. This is a story of a descent from Jerusalem to Jericho, and if you will from heaven to earth. This is also a story that moves from requirement to relinquishment. The robbers require from a man all his belongings, and so far as they were concerned his very life. Then comes a priest whose failure to give aid is driven by the requirements of Jewish religious law. As a priest, he could not come within four feet of a dead person. He would have been “*defiled*”, disqualified from carrying out his religious duties. In those days, the command not to defile oneself religiously was unconditional, while the commandment to love was conditional on circumstance. He did what he was expected to do.

Likewise, the Levite, a servant of the Temple and by extension the priest. To have stopped and helped the man would have been an affront to his superior, “*showing him up*” as it were. He was required, ironically, to “*do likewise*”...like his superior that is. Look, but don’t touch. Only the Samaritan “*relinquishes*”, and in so doing “*un-do’s*” harm others inflicted or allowed. Who is this Samaritan? Like the other characters in the story, his name is not given. Only in the end of the parable is he identified as “*the one who showed mercy.*” He comes as one unknown.

Significantly though, the Samaritan does everything that God does. Speaking through the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah God said, “*I will restore health to you, and your wounds I will heal.*” In Hosea God says, “*I will bind you up, revive you, raise you up, that you may live before me.*” This is above all the story of the one who comes and saves us. This story is not about “*being a Good Samaritan*,” it’s about “*having and believing in... a Good Shepherd.*”

The Samaritan does everything Jesus Christ does. He relinquishes at every level - personal safety, time, cultural pride, and money. He requires of the wounded man he comes upon virtually nothing save a willingness to ride with him down...down to Jericho. There, he supplies amply for his care, promises to return again, and in the meantime places enormous trust in an innkeeper, giving him more than enough to give the care the wounded man needs. The Good Samaritan comes down, finds, stops, and rescues...the Good Samaritan is our Savior.

In this story, "an expert in the law," a lawyer, asked a question that in effect says, "*What is the outer perimeter of my responsibility? At what point am I no longer liable?*" In effect, he is asking, "*What is required of me, and where can I quit loving?*" By his answer through the Good Samaritan parable, Jesus says, "*That's the wrong question.*" The question and message of this parable is not, "*Who is my neighbor?*" The question is, "*Who are you?*"? Go ahead, take your pick of the characters ... robber ... priest ... levite ... innkeeper, even the beaten man himself, you all need Jesus, don't you?

You, Christian do not check the Bible like a legal reference book and look for where you can stop loving. You Christian live humbly, gratefully, passionately and usefully because you have a Savior who will never stop loving you. You Christian know where that love began...the cross...and where it leads...eternal life. You Christian confess that Jesus relinquished everything for you. Now think about it. In this world, there is no shortage of folks who ascribe to the creed "*what's yours is mine...I take what I can*". Witness, despite their considerable talent the most recent Wall Street excesses as an example. In this world there are no shortage of folks who ascribe to the creed "*What's mine is mine...I do what's best for me.*" Witness, despite his considerable skill, the "Labronathon" from the other night where Mr. Labron James must have used the phrase "*This is about what is best for me at this time*" a dozen times is he used it once.

But your salvation is assured because of a Good Samaritan, a Good Shepherd, who found you and said, "*What's mine is yours...I do what's best for you.*" And still he roams the roads of this world. Who are you...robber, priest, levite, or one once beaten down and left for dead? Remember our story tells us the Good Samaritan didn't stay for long...next day he was on the road again...looking for those who he missed the first time perhaps...or looking for you?
AMEN

