

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost Proper 15 Year C

The story of the Good Samaritan has many layers. The problem with the story, or rather with our hearing of the story, is that it is too familiar. That is why the story needs to be told again, so that we may hear the challenge in the story that questions traditional values, shatters established norms of behaviour, and offers the new and radical alternative of a life motivated by love.

First, a word about the context. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. There is a sense of urgency and resolve in his journey. Luke says he had “set his face to go to Jerusalem”. The story is part of a longer section containing Jesus’ teaching on the meaning of discipleship. It is also a vision of the realm of God, where the abnormal becomes normal, where familiar situations need new definitions, where old enmities are put to rest. There is an atmosphere of growing hostility to Jesus and his mission. The story begins by noting that the lawyer asks Jesus a question to test or trap him.

So – let’s look at the lawyer first. His question concerning eternal life has to be looked at from his perspective. As a Jew, he is asking, “What must I do to be part of the new age of the Messiah?” He answers his own question: love God and love your neighbour. Jesus was not the first rabbi to combine these two commandments from different Old Testament sources. What is unique about Jesus is that he makes them equally important. And his teaching of how far his followers must go to carry out the double command goes way beyond the lawyer’s traditional interpretation.

As a Jew, the lawyer understood “neighbour” to mean fellow-citizens, other Jews. “Neighbour” did not include foreigners, resident aliens, or slaves. Jesus recognizes the real question behind the one that was asked. Out of his need to justify himself, the lawyer is in fact asking the opposite of what he seems to want. His is not a positive concern, asking who he might reach out to and love. His real question is, “Who is not my neighbour? How far do I have to go before I can stop?”

That’s a question we can probably understand and sympathize with. There are so many demands that people make on our limited resources of time, energy, and money. There is such desperate need in so many places. We cannot help all of these people; indeed, we can hardly help any of them. And yet we don’t want to feel guilty or inadequate. So we draw lines, boundaries around our concern. We want to know who we can legitimately place beyond our neighbourly concern without forfeiting our claim to be decent, moral people.

Well, political issues and events in all parts of the world suggest to me that this story still has something to say to us and the world in which we live. We are living in a time where people are driven apart by fear and rejection of “the other”, of those who look different or believe differently or hold differing opinions and priorities. I think this fear stems

from a perceived loss of influence and control by and for “people like us” – but who are “us” exactly? The recent mass shooting in Buffalo, NY, was fuelled by the racist ideology of the so-called “replacement theory”. That’s an extreme example, but I hear in conversations the rejection of responsibility for residential schools and the ongoing impacts of colonialism, or the thought that this society unjustly erects barriers against education and employment of minority groups. I think it’s a human tendency to draw lines around our definition of “neighbour” and place some outside it.

The story of the Good Samaritan turns our question back on us and makes us ask ourselves, “Why do we have to ask who is or is not my neighbour? What does that question tell us about ourselves and our reasons for caring for others? Why not just help those we can?” We spend so much energy trying to justify ourselves, energy that might be used to embrace our humanity and the humanity of others.

Another character in the story is the composite pairing of the priest and the Levite. The fact that they pass by the wounded man would not have surprised a Jewish audience. In fact, those privileged members of Jewish society are actually obeying the Law. If they came into contact with what they believed was a dead person, they would be rendered ritually unclean and temporarily unable to perform their duties in the temple. They are also being prudent. If the man were not dead, he could be pretending to be injured, and could have accomplices waiting to pounce on the unsuspecting ones who came to his aid. The priest and the Levite are the ordinary folk in the tale, the ones who go about their business and never claim to be heroes. But in the kingdom to come, the kingdom that is already at hand, business as usual, however useful or necessary, is no longer the order of the day. When the challenge to act in mercy comes into conflict with the requirements of religious purity or personal safety, there is simply no contest. Mercy takes priority over rules and regulations every time.

Then there’s the Samaritan, the one after whom we give this story its popular name. All three people who pass on the road see the injured man. Only the Samaritan, when he sees, has compassion. Compassion is not the same as sympathy or even empathy. Compassion is the bridge between seeing and doing. It is unconditional and goes beyond minimum requirements. Above all, it is action. The Samaritan does something. At some personal risk and inconvenience, the Samaritan tends to the needs of the stranger. He goes above and beyond by paying for the man’s continuing care. By the laws of that time, a person in debt could be enslaved until the debt was paid. By paying in advance, the Samaritan not only cares for the man’s immediate needs but ensures his future freedom as well.

The only problem with this story is that Samaritans were not supposed to be good people! They were the descendents of a mixed population brought in after the northern kingdom of Israel was defeated by the Assyrians (a defeat prophesied in today’s first reading). They had their own temple on Mt. Gerizim in their own territory. The Jews of Jesus’ day despised them as heretics and schismatics. They would go miles out of their

way to avoid travelling through Samaritan territory. And here, in this story, is one of them doing good against all expectations. How deeply shocking and offensive to hear the hated Samaritan presented as a hero!

Then, there is Jesus' intended audience. The irony in the story is that both the priest and the Levite are on their way to church. Jesus told his story to good, church-going folk who kept the law and admired this new young rabbi. They recognized his compassion – Jesus who stopped so often to help a leper, a despised tax collector, a foreigner whose child was near death. Evidently Jesus did not need to ask the lawyer's question about neighbours. He did not need to justify or explain himself. His audience grasped that reality, saw however dimly its possibilities.

Finally, the wounded man. He is the central character of the story, because any English teacher will tell you that the central character is the one with whom everyone else comes in contact. We can use our compassionate imagination to know how the victim in Jesus' story must have felt as he lay wounded on the road. We are meant to be him – to taste his fear, to feel his pain and then his terror at being left, perhaps to die. We share his dismay when two of his countrymen, from whom he had every right to expect help, pass him by. And perhaps his mixed emotions when the Samaritan stops to help him.

We don't like to think of ourselves as needy. We're successful people – we have nice homes with nice mortgages; we're reasonably healthy; our kids are reasonably well-adjusted. Yet you and I know, when we're honest, the depth of our need – the anxiety for a child in difficulty, the times of unemployment, the prayers for a sick relative, the pain of death. Above all, the secret, usually deeply buried, fear that maybe we're not OK, and hence our need to build defences against God and neighbour, against grace and love.

It's not such a bad thing to be needy. Those who know the depth of their need and the help that comes when least expected are best able to give the same help when they meet need face to face. Having shared those experiences of being graciously helped, apart from any question of our goodness or rights or claim to grace, we can be graceful to others. It's in responding to love that we may come to know we are lovable, and then "love-able" – able to love. Discovering that we are loved, we find the freedom to reach out to others without needing to prove our goodness.

In this way we learn, not only that we are to love God and our neighbour – like the lawyer, we already knew that – but how this can be done. The real question is not, "Who is my neighbour?" but "Which of the three acted like a neighbour to the one in need?" The answer lies in action. What shall I do to inherit eternal life ... Do this and you will live ... the one who did mercy ... Go and do likewise. Concrete actions for those in concrete need. Compassion is practical and active. It does not demand conversion or acceptance of a particular set of beliefs.

The very survival of our world and of the human race depends on our learning to see our neighbour in anyone in need and in anyone who differs from us, and then loving that neighbour whom God has put into our lives. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "Neighbourliness is not a quality in other people; it is simply their claim on ourselves. We have literally no time to sit down and ask ourselves whether so-and-so is our neighbour or not. We must get into action and obey – we must behave like a neighbour."