

Season After Pentecost [Proper 8] - Year C

July 13/14, 2013

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: Deuteronomy 30: 9-14; Psalm 25: 1-10; Luke 10: 25-37

A young boy was driving a hayrack down the road, and it turned over right in front of a farmer's house. The farmer came out, saw the young boy crying, and said, "Son, don't worry about this. We can fix it. Right now dinner's ready. Why don't you come in and eat with us and then I'll help you put the hay back on the rack." The boy said, "No, I can't. My father is going to be very angry with me." The farmer said, "Now don't worry. Just come in and have some lunch and you'll feel better." the boy said, "I'm just afraid my father is going to be very upset with me." The farmer sympathetically put an arm around the young boy and led him inside for dinner. Afterwards, as they walked outside to the hayrack, the farmer said, "Son, we'll see to this hay in no time. But don't you feel better now after a meal?" The boy said, "Yes but I just know that my father will be very angry with me." The farmer said, "Nonsense. By the way, where is your father anyway?" The boy said, "He's under that pile of hay."¹

Many people *mean* to be helpful, want to be helpful. Maybe that is why the "Good Samaritan" has gotten a place in our popular culture. You can find "Good Samaritan" in the dictionary — "A compassionate person who unselfishly helps others." There are hospitals, churches and charities that use the name. There are even "Good Samaritan" laws that protect those who offer reasonable assistance to another who is injured, ill or in peril. "Good Samaritan" is a biblical reference that seems to be widely known. It's certainly familiar to those raised in church. So familiar that we are likely to push it aside, like an old fashioned fable with a moral — "OK everybody, I want you to go out and be just like that Good Samaritan. He cared for someone in need; I want you to imitate him. Go and do likewise." "We will!" we say and go on our way. All done.

Jesus IS challenging us to walk the talk, to live out our beliefs. But there is always more going on in Jesus parables than we might first notice. More layers to chew on and

wonder about. For example, if the whole point of this parable is to help those in need, why the priest, Levite and Samaritan? Why not just average Tom, Dick and Harry, with the first two passing by the hurt stranger and the third being the one who stopped to care for the half-dead man? On the other hand, if this was a slam against the “religious establishment” who Jesus often tangled with, why isn’t the final, helpful traveler a layman – an ordinary Israelite – in contrast to the professional clergy?

The use of a Samaritan as the compassionate and sacrificing example of mercy was meant to have shock value to Jesus’ original listeners. “Good Samaritan” was an oxymoron, an impossible combination of words for the average Hebrew. The animosity between Samaritans and Jews was deep, fierce and long standing. Jesus’ choice of the Samaritan as the “hero” of the story was intended to unsettle many of his Jewish listeners. The scope of God’s love and saving work still can startle us. It’s bigger and wider than they or we imagined — big enough to include enemies and those thought to be unclean, rejects and losers. That interpretation of the parable would certainly be true to the gospel. But try on still another possible facet of this masterful parable.

“Who was a neighbor to the man who fell in to the hands of robbers?” “The one who showed him mercy,” the lawyer replies. Now Jesus has put his Jewish listeners in a quandary. Where do they fit in this story on the road to Jericho? No one wants to be the robber, the Priest or the Levite in the parable. But no good Jew would want to identify with a Samaritan either, no matter how generous or good he appears. That leaves the half-dead man in the ditch. “Go and do likewise” Really? Be the broken guy in the ditch? Why might Jesus want us to put our own faces on the man in the ditch?

In a sermon on this parable, Martin Luther identified all of broken, sinful humanity as the man half-dead in the ditch. In the parlance of bad TV commercials, we’ve “fallen and we can’t get up.” As much as we may try to be the baptized saints we are, the sinner of our fallen nature still has great power and influence. You can even see it in the lawyer’s initial question, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” “I” The lawyer has eaten from

the same tree as Adam and Eve. He imagines that HE can be in control of eternity. That HE can negotiate with God and pay his way into eternal life with the right amount of religious observance and good works. What we do matters greatly to God. But the power to give eternal life is God's alone. Our Lord has made it abundantly clear that God's eternal acceptance and love is GIFT — not earned, bought, weaseled or stolen. When we see our face on the man who fell into the hands of robbers, we begin to understand that only God's generous, gracious Savior can rescue us from ourselves, raise us to new life and procure an eternity with God.

Another thought. If we are the man in the ditch. Helpless and hurting, we can come to a humbling and freeing realization: We CAN'T make it on our own.... we CAN'T walk this way of Christ, we can't be our best, we can't avoid our demons and addictions on our own. We want to take care of our health....we want to have a good spiritual life.... We want to be a Good Samaritan...We want to help better our community and world... BUT we keep slipping back into the ditch: getting distracted and disillusioned, rationalizing poor choices, afraid of losing out or getting used. For all our religious virtues, attitudes and intentions, we are as helpless as the man in the ditch to always be "good" or to "Go and do the same" by our own strength. How do we move from near-death in the ditch to abundant life in Christ, the Good Samaritan?

Robert Wuthnow, a professor at Princeton University, once conducted some research about why some people are generous and compassionate, while others are not. He found out that for many compassionate people something had happened to them. Someone had acted with compassion toward them, and this experience had transformed their lives. For example, Wuthnow tells the story of Jack Casey, a rescue squad worker, who had little reason to be a Good Samaritan. Casey was raised in a tough home, the child of an alcoholic father. He once said, "All my father ever taught me is that I didn't want to grow up to be like him."

But something happened to Jack when he was a child that changed his life, changed his heart. He was having surgery one day, and he was frightened. He remembers the surgical nurse standing there and compassionately reassuring him. "Don't worry," she said to Jack. "I'll be here right beside you no matter what happens." And when Jack woke up again, she was true to her word and still there.

Years later, Jack Casey, now a paramedic, was sent to the scene of a highway accident. A man was pinned upside down in his pickup truck, and as Jack was trying to get him out of the wreckage, gasoline was dripping down on both of them. The rescuers were using power tools to cut the metal, so one spark could have caused everything to go up in flames. The driver was frightened, crying out how scared he was of dying. Jack said to the truck driver, "Look, don't worry," he said, "I'm right here with you, I'm not going anywhere." When I said that, Jack remembered later, I was reminded of how that nurse had said the same thing and she never left me. Days later, the rescued truck driver said to Jack, "You know, you were an idiot, the thing could have exploded and we'd both have been burned up!" "I just couldn't leave you," Jack said.²

Something had happened to Jack Casey that transformed him, made him into a Good Samaritan. Has anything like that ever happened to you? Yes it has. "And along comes a Good Samaritan, a Good Samaritan named Jesus -despised and rejected-who comes to save us, speaks tenderly to us, lifts us into his arms, and takes us to the place of healing."³ We are forever held in the arms of a Lord who CAN pour the oil of healing and the wine of hope into our wounds.. Who carries us when we can't walk and brings us to a place of caring where there is a life-giving meal and the Word and people of the Good Samaritan. The divine power of Jesus compassion and mercy is made to transform our lives and hearts. Experiencing the love and grace of God can change us, so that the power and mercy of God is set loose in the world through us.

There is no ending to this parable Jesus. We do not know what happened to the man robbed, beaten and left half dead along the road.. What effect did this experience

have on him? He would surely have scars from his violent attack. But what would remain with him from his encounter with the unearned, undeserved love from the Good Samaritan? Here again, we are like that man rescued by the Good Samaritan. Once we've know God's great compassion and its impact... after we've made it through a terrible time by a gracious power beyond our own will or abilities, how will we respond? Will we be changed? Will we let our lives be shaped by the love of God? That's what Jesus hopes — "Go and do like wise." Let Jesus, the Good Samaritan, who loves and rescues us give us the will and power to be people of grace and kindness.

Linda M Alessandri 7/13/13

ENDNOTES

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1. Unknown author, posted on www.homiliesbyemail.com/Special/Fathers/fathersday.html
 2. Rev. Dr. Thomas Long "Meeting the Good Samaritan" Luke 10:24-37 July 15, 2007 www.Day1.org
 3. Rev. Dr. Thomas Long "Meeting the Good Samaritan" Luke 10:24-37 July 15, 2007 www.Day1.org