

July 14, 2019
Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend
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Luke 10: 25-37/Proper 10

“What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

“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.”

A familiar saying for us Christians. We find it in the gospel of Mark and Matthew as well. But in those gospels it is an answer to a question about the greatest commandments. In today’s gospel it is the answer to a question about “eternal life.” A life that is not seduced by the power of corruption.

Luke has a lawyer in his story ask: “And who is my neighbor?” In doing so Luke pushes beyond knowledge of the letter of the law to how we live it. And then Luke introduces a parable of Jesus.

We call it the parable of the Good Samaritan, an all too familiar parable, perhaps. Jesus didn’t call it that. We came up with that. Because of the way Luke frames the story.

But I suggest we take another look at the parable itself. It really calls our attention not so much to the Samaritan, even though his actions are described in detail, but to the guy who is splayed out on the roadside. He is the one this parable is really about.

I think it’s worth taking a little time to explore what a parable is and how it functions. They were such an important part of Jesus’ teaching. And a way Jesus describes what a kingdom of God would be like. Parables were his preferred way of teaching. And they drove people crazy.

So, some reflection on what a parable is and then I will return to particular elements in the one we hear today.

Parables are made up stories. They are fictitious. They may be about possible scenarios. But they are not ones that really happened. To borrow from Dom Crossan, who is perhaps the best at the short pithy saying, “Parables never happen. They always happen.” Parables never happen. They always happen. That might be your best take away from this morning.

The parable is invitational. You don’t have to accept the story line. You can respond to it or not. And in any way you wish. Parables don’t dictate a response. Their intention is to provoke your thinking. And stir us to ask, “What do I make of this? “

We tend to think of parables as “exemplar stories,” little moral tales, telling us how we should act. But that’s not their function. They don’t tell us what to do. They rather ask what we would do.

Parables then are not straight forward. They are not didactic. But they do call us to take another look at what is before us. And invariably from an unexpected angle.

I think a poem of Emily Dickinson’s describes how parables function. Her poem is not a commentary on parables. But I think it describes them to a tee. So I am going to use her poem to describe how parables work.

Here is the poem:

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant
 Success in Circuit lies
 Too bright for our infirm Delight
 The Truth ‘s superb surprise
 As Lightning to the Children eased
 With explanation kind
 The Truth must dazzle gradually
 Or every man be blind.

Tell all the Truth, but tell it slant. Parables are told at a slant. Parables as I said are not didactic. They don’t prescribe. They ask you what you think and then let you decide. I think Jesus told the Truth. All the Truth. And told it slant. The parable is the perfect vehicle for truth telling... at a slant.

Success in circuit lies, writes Dickinson. A circuit, like a roughly circular line, or route, or movement that starts and finishes at the same place. Like T. S. Eliot saying that “at the end of our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.” We will always be exploring. We must in our search for Truth. There are different routes, different ways of discovering. There are many angles from which to see any given thing. The search is circuitous. Rarely is it otherwise. So don’t settle on your first impression. Parables themselves are an exercise in Circuitry.

**Too bright for our infirm Delight
 The Truth’s Superb Surprise**

Too bright is the Truth. Too bright. Too illuminating. Too impartial. Too generous. Especially when it comes to the kingdom of God, what our world would be like if it were God’s domain. Our imaginative capacity for Delight, for Grace, is prejudiced. Prejudged. Predetermined. By what we have been told. Or by convention. Truth’s Superb Surprise is not always welcomed. Or comfortable. Parables invariably surprise us.

As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind (continues Dickinson)

So much of Jesus' teaching shatters our horizons. Like lightning against a night sky, startling a landscape under a strange unexpected light. Jesus' teaching can frighten like Lightning would a child. So just as we do our best to explain lightening to allay a child's fear, Jesus offers explanation of his own kind to us as well. He too wants to allay our fears. But not dampen our awe.

The truth must dazzle gradually
Or every one be blind.

The parable by its nature and function dazzles gradually. Parables unfold. And as they do, more is brought into view. Some will be ignited by a parable. Even shiver. Wondering if they have glimpsed the kingdom of God. Others may consider it a nonsense story and turn away and be gone. Whatever your response to a parable, its intent is to help you see not leave you blind.

Jesus was a master Parabler.

Now, a word about The Parable of the Good Samaritan or The Parable of the Guy on the Roadside.

The road from Jericho to Jerusalem is the setting for the parable. It is a precipitous route known to be a dangerous route of the Judean desert scape, a hide out for robbers and thieves. To have a mishap or murder on that road would not have been unexpected.

The guy on the roadside. Someone lying on that road from Jericho to Jerusalem might well have been dead. To come in contact with a corpse or even the shadow of a corpse was a violation of purity. Purity, in Jesus' day, was a religious and social category.

The priest and the Levite knew and practiced the letter of the Law and all its strict purity codes and norms. They were religious elites. Thought by many to be "callous clergy." Observing purity was an utmost value. Risking violating purity a ritual mistake. Of course they would pass by the guy on the roadside.

The Samaritan. The conflict and animosity between the Samaritans and the Jews is classic "us and them" rivalry. They were different ethnic groups and held different beliefs and were thought to be worshipping different gods. Samaritans were considered moral and mortal enemies of the Judeans.

The hearers of this story would be familiar with all the above.

So, the parable begins with a man who has been stripped, robbed, and beaten; left for dead. Then by chance a priest and Levite come along the road. And they pass by him. The hearers of this story might well have nodded and smirked at this scenario. Ah, yes, those priests and Levites, those righteous ones, caring more about their own ritual observances than someone who needs help. A familiar story, they may have mused. We know what it is like to be dismissed by them. Considered less than they. Ignored. Left aside as if we were dead. Yes, the passing by of the priest and Levite. Sounds all too familiar.

Now enters a Samaritan, a moral and mortal enemy. And the Samaritan, throwing all caution aside, goes to the aid of the person and helps this poor victim who is helpless.

Here is the dilemma. Where are the sympathies of the hearers at this point, as the plot of the parable unfolds?

If the hearers initially sympathized with the priest and Levite they would be identifying with the callous clerics, the superior elites and in this case their good for nothing righteousness. If they sympathized with the guy splayed out on the roadside they would be identifying with a victim. An inferior to be sure. If they identified with the Samaritan, they would be allying with a hated one and enemy. So, where do the hearers of this parable find themselves leaning?

None of the options look very good.

And then Jesus' goes on and on about the Samaritan. The Samaritan is not only moved with compassion but bandages the victim's wounds and pours olive and wine on them to soothe and disinfect, puts him on his own animal, brings him to an inn and looks after him. The next day he takes out two silver coins and says to the innkeeper to look after the man until he returns and he will then reimburse the innkeeper for any extra expenses.

Here ends the parable.

Here ends the parable. We are left like deer in headlights. What is this parable about? What was that all about?

But our Gospel story continues.

Luke goes on to ask the lawyer in his story, "Which of these three, in your opinion, acted like a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" Luke has set up the meaning for this parable with that question. "The one who showed compassion," replies the lawyer. That would be the Samaritan. And that was the "correct" answer. So, we call this The parable of the "Good" Samaritan.

But I suggest as we look at the parable itself we must throw our attention where the parable does. To the guy lying on the road. That is where the parable starts. That is the focus of the callous clergy. That is the one the Samaritan went to. That is the concern of this parable. The guy left for dead.

The concern of the parable is the victim. The outcast. The marginalized and ignored. The contaminated one. The disempowered. The one left for dead. Luke frames this parable with a question. "And who is my neighbor?" Luke answers it one way. But we might wonder if the neighbor is rather the victim, who by no fault of his own suffers a fate no one deserves?

The guy left on the roadside, is at the mercy of someone to help him. He is at the mercy of anyone who will help him. Even an enemy. A moral and mortal enemy. Is that our neighbor? The one at the mercy of the help of others? Are we to give help to those who least expect it, are powerless to ask for it, and powerless to refuse it? Are we to respond to anyone one who is at the mercy of help? In any circumstance?

There is no wall between us and them as this parable unfolds. All conventions are overturned here. All preset categories are smashed.

If this be Truth's Superb Surprise, is such a light is too bright for our infirmed eyes?

The victim is the one who deserves our attention in this parable. And what would we do about him?

Today, Sunday, there are raids on immigrants going on. Or so we are warned. On a Sunday of all days. I say they are victims. Victims of injustice. Are we to consider them our neighbor? Are migrants who are in dire need of help our neighbors? And what about, let's say, victims of a sex trafficker. Theirs was a dangerous road and they had no way of knowing how dangerous. They are victims through no fault of their own. Are we to consider them our neighbor? And let's say, what about people who through no fault of their own are denied medical insurance. They are victims of circumstances over which they have no control. Are they our neighbors? Where are we to draw the line?? Maybe it's easier for a Samaritan to be a neighbor than for us to side with victims who seem to some to be like litter in our streets.

Now, parables are only stories. They are just stories. Made up. We all know that. Parables never happen. But what if they always happen.

If we take the stance that parables are just fictitious stories we forfeit an opportunity to envision a different order of things. If we take the stance that parables never really happen we refuse an invitation of the imagination. If we dismiss a parable we ignore an opportunity to be dazzled and to see with new eyes. And we turn our back on the teachings of Jesus. Which are about the kingdom of God.

So, we come around to where we started. With the opening question of Luke's story today: What must I do to inherit eternal life? A life free from the power of corruption.

"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."

So, whom do we love when we love our God? And who is our neighbor?