

July 10, 2016 - 8th Sunday after Pentecost
Luke 10:25-37
The Rev. Carenda Baker

Given the events of the past weeks – from the mass shootings in Orlando, to the bombing of a holy Muslim site in Medina, to just this week, three separate shooting incidents in Baton Rouge, St. Paul, and Dallas involving violence and the use of deadly force between police and black men, all resulting in deaths – today we desperately need the gospel word to speak to our hearts, to ground us and give us direction and hope. That living gospel word comes to us in Luke's story of an encounter between Jesus and a lawyer.

Jewish scholar Amy Jill-Levine, in her book on the parables, "Short Stories by Jesus", offers commentary to help us understand the original context of this story. A lawyer has come to Jesus with a question. For Jesus' Jewish audience, the lawyer would have been a positive figure and his connection to Torah seen as a positive thing. However, writing years after Jesus' death and resurrection, Luke, for whatever reasons, casts the lawyer in a negative light. Luke writes that the lawyer came to "test" Jesus. In Luke's gospel, testing is not something desirable. Jesus is "tested" in the wilderness. The line from the Lord's Prayer – lead us not into temptation - is literally, "Do not bring us to the test". For Luke, the lawyer's question – "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" – is a trick question that cannot be answered because one does not "do" anything to "inherit" eternal life. And in reality, the Torah is not much interested in eternal life or life after death. It is much more interested in how to live in the present. (*Levine, 71-81*).

So for today, let's give the Jewish lawyer the benefit of the doubt, and suppose he might have been sincerely earnest in asking Jesus this question. What if he really *does* yearn to live life in a fuller, more abundant way? This then, would be a bold question coming from a person truly seeking the "good life", someone who is not content with living in the shallows near the surface. So, he dives into the deep with Jesus. Perhaps in his question the lawyer was really saying, ***"Show me the good stuff Jesus. Show me the path to authentic life right here, right now."***

The lawyer knows very well, and can cite the Jewish gold standard for living the good life: "love God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind, and your neighbor as yourself." Jesus commends his answer. And then, for whatever reason, the lawyer – maybe just because he's a lawyer and knows "the devil is in the details" – pushes Jesus for even more clarity. ***"So tell me then, Jesus; just who IS my neighbor?"***

And then Jesus tells the story that probably is the most well-known of all his parables. Even people who have no knowledge of Scripture are familiar with that term "good Samaritan". But we need to hear this story in a fresh way, with 21st century ears, because this parable was scandalous and offensive when Jesus told it.

As the story goes a man, traveling alone, is attacked by an armed gang on the eighteen-mile rocky path descending from Jerusalem to Jericho. The road was known

to be a most dangerous place. The lone traveler is stripped, beaten, and left for dead. First, a priest and then a Levite happen along, and both pass by on the other side. The Law (Torah) would have expected them to stop and help the man, whether he was dead or alive, because Torah teaches one is to love both the neighbor and the stranger. Neither the priest nor the Levite does what they would have known was the right thing to do in that situation.

We don't know why they didn't stop; Jesus didn't include those details in his story. As good an explanation as any was offered in a sermon on this passage by Martin Luther King, Jr, who said: "I'm going to tell you what my imagination tells me. It's possible these men were afraid. . . And so the first question that the priest and the Levite asked was, 'If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?'. . . But then the Samaritan came by, and he reversed the question: "If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?" (*Levine, 94*).

So it is that we arrive at the most crucial part of this parable. A Jewish audience in Jesus' day would have been expecting the 3rd character who comes down the road and could help the wounded man would be a common and devout Jew – the ordinary Joe who turns out to be the hero they could relate to and cheer for – someone just like them, an Israelite. Much like the way we might start one of those old jokes: "A doctor, a lawyer, and a priest walked into a bar. . .", so Jesus' hearers would have been sure they knew what was coming next. But what they expect to hear is not the story Jesus tells.

In Jesus' story, the third person to come along the road after the wounded traveler is a Samaritan. There was long-standing enmity between Jews and Samaritans. At one time both groups were part of the twelve tribes of Israel united under King David, but that monarchy eventually split into northern and southern kingdoms. The southern kingdom, Judah, with its capital in Jerusalem, retained a descendant of David on the throne. The northern kingdom, Israel, with its capital in Samaria, was ruled by a series of charismatic leaders – kings both good and not so good or faithful to Yahweh. Both kingdoms were eventually conquered by other nations – Babylon and Persia. Samaria was accused of consorting for self-preservation with one of those invading nations, Assyria. So from the late 6th century BCE to the time of Jesus, Jews and Samaritans remained at odds. Each claimed theirs was the one true line of descent from Abraham, theirs the one true understanding of Torah, theirs the correct priesthood, and only theirs the right form of worship in the proper Temple location – for the Jews, Jerusalem and for the Samaritans, Mt. Gerazim (*Levine, 98*).

All this means that Jesus' Jewish hearers' jaws would have dropped as he told this story. Samaritans to Jews were "half breeds", the enemy. Amy-Jill Levine suggests that "the idea of a "good Samaritan" would make no more sense than the idea of a "good rapist" or a "good murderer" ". When Jesus asks the lawyer at the end of the story which of the three acted as a neighbor to the wounded man, the lawyer cannot bring himself to use the "S" word – Samaritan. He answers simply, "the one who showed mercy." I can imagine the lawyer standing with his head down, and not speaking very confidently or loudly at this point. Likely the reaction of those who heard Jesus' story

was that their guts were churning, their blood pressure rising, and their fists clenching because their sensibilities had just been incredibly offended.

For the sake of our 21st century reality, let's for a moment write ourselves into Jesus' story – taking the place of the wounded man, lying by the side of the road. Now ask yourself this question: who is the person that you would rather die than have come help you in a time of need? And who is the person or group whose members would rather die than stop and help you?

This is a tough and provocative question, to be sure. Here are just a few possibilities: Imagine an Israeli Jewish man is robbed, and a good Hamas Palestinian member saves his life. A liberal Democrat is robbed, and a good conservative Republican who supports the NRA saves her life. A white supremacist is robbed, and a good black, inner city teenager saves his life. A transgender woman is robbed, and a good anti-LGBTQ activist from Westboro Baptist Church saves her life. .

It was just that uncomfortable, that radical and risky a telling when Jesus stunned his Jewish listeners by making the Samaritan “the good guy”. As preacher Debi Thomas puts it: “Jesus was inviting his hearers to consider the possibility that a person might add up to more than the sum of her political, racial, cultural, religious, and economic identities. He was calling them to put aside the history they knew, and the prejudices they nursed. He was asking them to leave room for divine and world-altering surprises. . . He was saying that your neighbor is the one who scandalizes you with compassion. Your neighbor is the one who upends all the entrenched categories and shocks you with a fresh face of God. Your neighbor is the one who mercifully steps over the ancient, bloodied line separating “us” from “them”, and teaches you the meaning of the word “Good” “. (“Go and Do Likewise” in the webzine, *Journey with Jesus*, 7/3/16).

The good news today, friends, comes with a challenge for us. This story calls for a transformation in our actions. This parable calls us to walk with Jesus by dying to that which prevents us from drawing near, coming close in a caring and personal way to any and all whom we meet, even the one we consider our enemy. The truth is that from God's perspective, there are no “others” in this world. There is only “us” – humankind, each one of us created in the image of God.

Several weeks ago after Sunday morning worship at Trinity, I was chatting with one of our dear members. She took my hands in hers, looked at me and said, “Carenda, are you praying for Donald Trump?” UH-OH! (and, Oh, no). We'd had no conversations about politics until that moment. I managed to say, “Well, I'm having trouble with that right now.” I didn't want to pray for him. I listened as she shared a few hopeful thoughts about Donald Trump. I did not tell her that a week before, I had been feeling quite sad and overwhelmed, and was really grieving over the polarization in our country, and the mean-spirited words that have been spoken throughout these many months of campaigning for the presidency. And I have felt rather helpless in just not knowing what I can do to address or change or staunch the flow of ugliness. That, compounded with the incessant stream of horrendous acts of violence and murder, the hatred acted

out that keeps bombarding us. Praying has been difficult. In that week when I was feeling so down, at the Wednesday noon healing Eucharist at Trinity, I had an intimate God moment, a drawing near of the Holy One – at the point when I held up the host, about to break it for Communion. As I broke it, I had the clear recognition that our sin keeps wounding Jesus over and over again – my sin and everybody else's. And I felt such pain in that recognition. For a few moments I had difficulty continuing with the liturgy. I have heard Mother Barbara say on several occasions in her sermons that this is the moment that is both the worst and best point of the week for her – recognizing our own participation in sin and brokenness, and yet knowing there is forgiveness and healing and new life that comes through the breaking, in Christ's life sacrificed for us. It is death raised to new life. That Wednesday healing service was the first time that I have experienced in such a visceral and immediate way, in the Eucharist, the reality of the cost of what has been done for us, and the pain that God continues to feel. And yet - the goodness and love and mercy of God continues to pour out for the healing of the whole world.

The good news today calls us to action, action that we can take boldly because we know that we have not been left to fix the unfixable ourselves. Jesus is our ultimate "good" Samaritan, the one who has come, who sees and notices us in our brokenness, who stops and tends our wounds, picks us up and carries us to that place of safety and healing, a place of intimate, caring connection with God, restoring us to community. And Jesus stays right there, coming to meet us daily to walk with us and check in on us. Jesus is fully present as we gather weekly together in worship to hear God's story and our story, to offer prayers, and receive the nourishment and strength of Christ's holy presence in the Eucharist. The life-altering good news is that to love God is to love neighbor is to love God. We can't have one without the other. (Point out picture of Celtic cross on the bulletin cover, with a circle at its center). It's a seamless, undivided, holy circular relationship between loving God and loving neighbor.

Friends, if we want the real deal, the full and abundant good life - God's kingdom life that Jesus wants us to receive and share, the life that Jesus came to give us - if that's what we want, Jesus says, *"Do THIS and you will live"*. Be the one who shows mercy. Be a neighbor who puts no fences around God's love, because God hasn't and won't. Be a neighbor who faces into the fear, even fear of rejection and death, be one who gives and loves anyway.

I leave us with the words of the Christian mystic Teresa of Avila:

“Christ has no body now, but yours.
No hands, no feet on earth, but yours.
Yours are the eyes through which
Christ looks compassion on the world.
Yours are the feet
with which Christ walks to do good.
Yours are the hands
with which Christ blesses all the world.”

Lord, make it so. Amen.