

7/14/19 Pentecost + 5 c

The Parable of the Good Samaritan is so familiar that we may be a bit immune to it. But this morning, I'd like to take a closer look at this story. Just maybe, we can get a fresh perspective.

Let's start with the context that Luke gives. A lawyer was testing Jesus. Even though he already knew exactly what the Law said about loving God and neighbor, this lawyer still asked what he needed to do in order to inherit eternal life. After Jesus answered, he played word games with the Law.

Then Jesus challenged his whole way of thinking. Jesus began with the familiar situation of a man who had been robbed and beaten almost to death. Then Jesus described how a priest and Levite did not dare to touch a man who may have been dying.

They had some particular reasons why not. That's what the Law seemed to require. Only somebody with "clean hands" could do their jobs. They didn't have the disinfectants that we have today. So, according to the rules, if they did touch a dying or dead person, they no longer would have "clean hands." They would have been suspended from their jobs.

Realistically, if the wounded man had died, what good would have been done by their unemployment? So, they walked by safely on the other side of the road. They saw important, practical priorities that came before what may have been a useless gesture of compassion. Compassion almost always involves risk, sometimes more risk than we're willing to take.

Next, Jesus drew a contrast with a Samaritan. The Law that made the priest and Levite so special did not apply to him at all. In a paradoxical way, he was more free to do all that he could to save a stranger, not just any stranger, but a Jew.

As you've probably heard repeatedly, the often violent hatred between Jews and Samaritans was just as bad as any of the hatreds that break out in violence today. Yet, rather than join in the violence, this Samaritan helped this Jewish victim.

This story showed how revolutionary Jesus really was. He dared to challenge laws that interfered with love, and he challenged the violent hatred between Jews and Samaritans.

As wise teachers so often do, Jesus changed the question that he was asked. The lawyer asked, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus answer in terms of "Who acted like a neighbor?"

Real love for God and neighbor does not ask, "What am I required to do?" Rather, love asks, "What good do I have an opportunity to do?" Then love takes the risk of acting for the good of the other according to the particular opportunities and needs of the situation. Finally, Jesus told the lawyer to act like this.

However, even more basic than questions of right and wrong is the one that the lawyer asked first, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus replied with a parable about how eternal life flowed through a hated Samaritan infidel, and how it prevailed over the forces of evil and death.

Through his compassion, this Samaritan was a personal channel of the eternal life that one day shall transform our whole creation. For Jesus, eternal life involves far more than checking the boxes so that we can try to obligate God to reward us after we die. Rather,

eternal life both starts now and continues beyond death. Eternal life is about us and also is about our neighbors and our world.

Eternal life flows through us in those precious moments when our deeds serve God's love. These deeds never will be good enough to earn eternal life for us. But Jesus can use them anyway to channel his life-giving love through us.

Let's look at the big picture here, something that goes way beyond those few people in the parable. As flawed and contaminated as our acts of love may be, God may use them in one way or another to build a new heaven and a new earth.

Every time we act in mercy as the good Samaritan did, Jesus can transform these deeds and use them for healing a world that is so afflicted by the powers of evil and death, powers that we see in violent acts so very often. In the hands of Jesus, no act of love is ever wasted, not even when those like the wounded man in the parable actually do die. For our Lord can use our acts of love as seeds for bearing good fruit when he comes again.

Whether we can see how or not, what we do for our Lord is never in vain. On the other hand, every time we act like the priest and Levite, that gives Jesus more wounds to heal and more evils to overcome.

Until our Lord comes again, we may have little idea of exactly how we help or hinder his work of making our whole world into a new creation. We can pray that he makes us a new creation more and more each day, and that his Holy Spirit inspires us more to love God and to love our neighbors both wisely and well. We can act on what we pray.

Eternal life is God's gift to us, received through faith; and God's kingdom shall come by God's power, one way or another, with us or without us. In our Lord's continuing battle against evil and death, don't we want to help his side?

Let's face it. Acting like the Samaritan can be risky, and it can involve more sacrifice than we dare to make. So, to inspire and strengthen us, Jesus gives us his Word, his Sacraments, prayer, and our fellow disciples. The Holy Spirit can use these precious gifts to help us in our times of weakness, confusion, and sinfulness.

As we gather together with our fellow sinners to receive these gifts of God, we can be opened up just a little bit more for God's love to flow through us to others. We can become more enlightened in our faith and more wise in our compassion. We can become more clear about the divine promises of eternal life in which we hope. As we gather together, God's Holy Spirit can use us in one way or another to help each other to be channels of eternal life in our part of God's world.

The lawyer asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Our Lord answered a different question, "What can I do so that God's eternal life flows through me?"

Deeds of love for God and for other people is what the actions of eternal life look like here and now. One day, God shall transform all of our violent creation. May this transformation begin anew in us today. Amen

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