

Sermon for July 14, 2013

Eighth Sunday of Pentecost, Luke 10:25-37

BLESSINGS TO YOU AND PEACE FROM GOD THE FATHER, OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST, AND THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

The longer I live here in Riverside the more I learn what an awesome place this is. Especially, especially, when it comes to being Christian and being able to live out the gospel message as we serve our neighbor. This last Tuesday I was asked by one of the pastors from Calvary Presbyterian church to go along with a group of people from their social outreach team to the Access Center here in Riverside. This center, as I learned, is a place where the homeless people can come for free assistance. The center is city and county funded. In this place the homeless are given free health care, bus passes, permanent housing for the chronically homeless, food cards, they have access to computers for job searches, phones, and they can even use the center's address for their own mailing address so they are able to receive mail. There is also a veterans' benefits assistance program available there. This facility is a wonderful resource for the homeless who are looking for a fresh start and assistance in our community.

As the group made our way out the door with all the information we had received in hand there was a woman who was sitting in one of the chairs waiting to be helped. She had her head covered with a scarf and a hat, had on a heavy coat,

and she had a weather beaten face. I heard her say to the person next to her, “These must be important people.” When I walked by her she smiled with a toothless grin, grabbed my hand, looked into my eyes, and said to me, “I am important too.” I said, “Yes, you are.” That was it. I may never see that woman again in my life but for that brief second I found myself looking into the eyes of God.

In Wednesday’s devotion in our “Christ in Our Home” daily devotional was the sentence, “Helping others means being willing to enter into the struggles of their situations.” And isn’t that what we just read about in our gospel reading for this morning? The parable of the Good Samaritan is one of the most famous of all of Jesus’ parables. One does not have to be a Christian to know this story as the phrase has become commonly used in our society. But just what does it really mean to be a “Good Samaritan”? What does it really mean to love your neighbor as yourself? And just who is considered our neighbor like the lawyer asked Jesus? Those are 3 pretty deep questions primarily when we ask them within: the context of Christianity, what it means to be a part of the Kingdom of God, and in the teachings of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

The Samaritan in our lesson this morning was not a stranger to personal or cultural struggles for you see the Jews and Samaritans at that time would have had nothing to do with each other. As a matter of the fact, the Samaritans were

members of a despised minority, shunned, and hated by the Jews because the Samaritans had adopted their own version of the Jewish religion and customs. A contemporary of Luke, Rabbi Eliezer said of Samaritans, “He that eats the bread of the Samaritans is like one who eats the flesh of swine.” OUCH. Any good Jew would have known what that statement was about.

So if that was the case of these two cultures which felt so strongly opposed to each other—why do you suppose the Samaritan stopped to help the man who had fallen into the hands of robbers, a man who was stripped, beaten, and left half dead? (Pause) Just perhaps, as he passed by, he suddenly saw himself in a similar situation as one who had been attacked and left for dead along the side of the road—as this road to and from Jerusalem was a dangerous route, well known for robberies and beatings. Possibly, all at once the man laying alongside the road was not “labeled” as a Jew but a man who had a face the Samaritan could recognize as the common face of all people, the blessed image of God—the image of his neighbor. Jesus said that the Samaritan was “moved with pity.” How then could he not stop to help? How could he not love this man—his neighbor—as himself? After all: they were one, the same flesh, suffering the same pain, made in the same image of God, by the same God.

“Helping others means being willing to enter into the struggles of their situations.”

The Samaritan in our gospel story today showed kindness and compassion to the man when no one else did. In this parable there are at least 12 specific acts of mercy that the Samaritan offered to the man along the road. He truly showed love to his neighbor as himself. The good deed he did simply flowed out of his willingness to enter into the struggle of a neighbor. By his actions the Samaritan translated compassion into help for a suffering, unknown man, with no thought or concern for himself or his own wellbeing.

That folks is the message in this gospel lesson—it is about really seeing the other, seeing the neighbor as ourselves, as a beloved child of God. It is about looking at someone beyond their human form and seeing them as a divinely created being with the essence of God contained within their heart and soul. It is about compassion and a willingness to risk and to reach out with kindness, generosity, and selflessness in a way that still continues to surprise us in our society today.

Having a change of heart is also what this gospel story is about because simply knowing in our minds what the right thing to do is does not mean that we do it. If we are going to be Good Samaritans right here and right now then this parable needs to mean more to us than knowing what doing the right thing is. It will take a change of heart because many people who have acted in the most compassionate way have had something happen to them to stir up that compassion inside of them

for their neighbor. Possibly someone had acted with compassion toward them and that experience had transformed their lives and changed their heart so they could go forward with compassion toward others—that is where being a neighbor to all comes in. “Helping others means being willing to enter into the struggles of their situations.”

For Christians there are no boundaries to loving one’s neighbor just as there are no boundaries in God’s love for us. Jesus is the one who comes to us when we are in need lying along the side of the road suffering and in pain when others pass us by, when no one else will stop and help us. Jesus is our Good Samaritan and our true neighbor. He is the one who is there for us. Our caring for others is not separate from loving God; it is one in the same as we are all made in God’s image with God’s presence inside of us. Like the woman in the Access Center who grabbed my hand, looked into my eyes, and said to me, ““I am important too.” We are all precious and important to the Kingdom of God no matter if it is someone we personally know or someone we have not yet met. We are all important because we are all beloved children of God.

I would like to conclude my sermon with a facebook post from Josh Anderson, one of our youth, which I just read this week. I asked him if this would be OK and he said yes—it reads. (Quote) “Late night walks in the park are seriously the best thing ever. Everything becomes clear. You have space to think. While I was out a

teenager who had run away from home asked to use my phone. He called his girlfriend and he decided to return home. A half hour later his dad and brother are wandering around the park shouting his name. I spoke to them and told them he had already returned home. They borrowed my phone to confirm it. It was a fascinating experience, being some small part of a situation like that, even if all I truly did was stop his family from wandering for any longer. I'd like to think that even though I was minor, I was still significant. Like every person on the planet in the grand scheme of things. Minor, yet significant in their own way." (End quote)

Thanks be to God for the opportunity to be significant in our own way as modern day Good Samaritans. AMEN.