

Proper 10 Year C July 10, 2017
Westminster-Canterbury Afternoon Devotions
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Luke 10:25-37 "The Good Samaritan"

The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was a dangerous one. He had probably been warned not to travel alone along this twenty-mile stretch in the wilderness. Was there some urgency to his mission, or was he just headstrong, thinking he could make this journey without incident? The robbers appeared, seemingly out of nowhere and ambushed him. They made off with everything, his money, his animal, his clothing. They left him to die along that deserted highway.

What did he think as he lay there, the life slowly draining out of him? Did he see the priest who walked nearby then changed course to avoid him? Or the Levite who did not break stride as he crossed the road ignoring the dying man, a fellow Jew. This man, lying helplessly on the road had learned about God – a God of justice and mercy – from men just like these. Perhaps in this moment of crisis he would not have seen them from the distance they kept – probably a mercy, as such a sense of abandonment might lead him to lose all hope.

We are told that he was half dead, so possibly he had some awareness when a man finally stopped and bent down next to him. He might have taken in the sensations - the feel of the oil being tenderly rubbed into the open wounds that throbbed with pain, and then the wine that stung at first before numbing the injuries. Perhaps he took in the warmth and earthy smell of the animal whose back he was draped over – the rhythmic clapping of hooves on the dusty road. Eventually there would be the smells and sounds of a town – the aroma of food being prepared and sold in the streets; snippets of laughter, conversations, and possibly even exclamations of astonishment at the injured man on the back of an animal being led by a stranger. Finally, the

animal stops, and the man is lifted and carried into a building, then to a room and placed on a bed. A feeling of safety spreads over him – the crisis is over; it is safe to shut his eyes and sleep for a while.

When did he realize this stranger who had shown such extravagant care to him was a Samaritan? How did he reconcile that the man who had saved him and healed his wounds was someone that he had been taught to hate and mistrust for as long as he could remember? Yet here he was, unexpectedly alive and getting stronger each day, thanks to this Samaritan who saw him dying on the road and had mercy upon him.

In every age and every culture people tend to separate themselves into groups they deem acceptable and then define other groups who are shunned because they are somehow different or “other.” These lines of demarcations can be based on an endless array of factors including religion, race, ethnicity, profession and political ideology. Our own history is filled with periods of segregation and social injustice, but we have all witnessed events that helped heal past wrongs and foster acceptance among groups that were once adversaries. Still, recent events illustrate that there is much work to be done to help us grow in love and tolerance for one another and let go of our fear and misconceptions about those we see as different from ourselves.

The challenge of breaking down the walls of mistrust and intolerance that we face today was in full force at the time of Jesus and is explored in the story of the Samaritan who rescues a seriously injured Jew. Jesus tells this story in response to the question “And who is my neighbor,” posed by a lawyer who engages Jesus in a conversation. Their exchange begins with a question to Jesus about the path to eternal life, and Jesus queries him, “What is written in the Law?” The lawyer lays out the scriptural directives to love God with heart, soul, strength, and mind, and your neighbor as yourself, and Jesus concurs with his answer. When asking Jesus to

clarify exactly who his neighbor is, the Lawyer seems to be suggesting that it is possible to quantify those people to whom this neighborly love should be extended. There is the implication the people who fall outside of this definition can safely be excluded from this directive to love one's neighbor.¹

Samaritans and Jews had a long history of intolerance for one another, probably stemming from the division of ancient Israel into two nations worshiping the same God, but over time developing different customs for the worship of this God. Casting a Samaritan as the “good guy” in a story Jesus is telling to a Jewish audience would have been quite provocative to his listeners.² That he uses a Samaritan to illustrate the deep love and mercy that is at the core of the kind of neighborliness that God expects of his people would have been downright shocking. When asked to identify the neighbor in the story, the lawyer cannot even utter the “S-word,” instead he replies, “the one who showed him mercy.”³

Overcoming the fear and intolerance our culture teaches us is a difficult and challenging task, but clearly a call we must respond to if we are to fully embrace the love and healing Jesus desires for each of us. Loving our neighbor as ourselves often involves reaching out to others with love and mercy, but it also means opening ourselves to the possibility that the very people who we fear the most may in fact be the source of the love and mercy that we need in our own lives.

What might that man have made of his situation as he lay in that Inn on the Judean highway and recovered from his injuries? How long do you think it would take for his fear to turn to gratitude, and his preconceptions transform into the realization that goodness and mercy are not confined to one group of people⁴ - but part of our shared human nature – where God's merciful and loving image is reflected in each and every one of us?

¹ Cynthia A Jarvis, “Proper 10 Luke 10:25-37) Pastoral Perspective” in Feasting on the Word Year C: Volume 3 ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Taylor Brown, (Louisville KY Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 240.

² Matthew L. Skinner, “Proper 10 Luke 10:25-37) Exegetical Perspective” in Feasting on the Word Year C: Volume 3 ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Taylor Brown, (Louisville KY Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 243.

³ Jarvis 242

⁴ Douglas John Hall, “Proper 10 Luke 10:25-37) Theological Perspective” in Feasting on the Word Year C: Volume 3 ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Taylor Brown, (Louisville KY Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 242.