

## **“Our Walking Is Our Preaching”**

A Sermon for the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, July 11<sup>th</sup>, 2010

Deuteronomy 30:9-14 and Luke 10:25-37

“For while we were still weak,” Paul writes to the Romans, “at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. . . For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life.”

“It is no use walking anywhere to preach,” said St. Francis of Assisi, “It is no use walking anywhere to preach unless our walking is our preaching.”

Three people were walking, walking down a road one day, two passed by on the other side and kept going, while one pulled off the road and stopped. Two people did not act. One man acted. We’d like to know why.

Route 66 from Jerusalem to Jericho was a hazardous stretch of road lined with caves where bandits could lie in wait to ambush passers by. It wasn’t smart to take the old Jericho Road alone; so, if you had to travel this way, and many did, it only made good sense to take the bus, that is, to travel with others in a caravan for your own protection.

One of the highly unusual features of Jesus’ parable of the good Samaritan is that all the people in this story travel alone. So, it’s no surprise that somebody gets beaten up, robbed of everything on him, and left in the ditch to die. That’s what happens when you travel the Jericho Road alone. Maybe it’s not so hard to understand why, in this story of the good Samaritan, two of the three travelers just keep going. One might very well imagine that what happened to the guy in the ditch could happen to any one of us traveling by ourselves on that road. And why not use the dying man as a decoy to lure the rest of us into an ambush? And, if the man was dead, even going near the corpse would have rendered the priest and the Levite ritually unclean, unfit to return to the temple.

I’d say that the travelers in this story had some very good reasons just to keep on going, much better reasons than most of have for passing by people in trouble. The travelers in the story could have lost their lives while most of the time all we stand to lose is a little time.

Two people did not act, while one man acted. We’d like to know why, but Jesus doesn’t say exactly why the priest and Levite acted as they did, nor does he say why the Samaritan acted as he did. All Jesus says is “Go, and do likewise.” But there’s something deeper going on here than simply, “OK folks, get out there and be like that Good Samaritan.” The fact is, maybe we can’t, and for some very good reasons.

The shock of this parable is that two people who might have helped; of all people, two people who would have been expected to help, came down the road, saw the man in trouble, and intentionally crossed over to the other side of the road. People expect that if you’re wearing a clergy collar you’re more likely to help them out, that you ought to help them out, that you’re expected to help them out, and that, if you don’t help them out, you ought to be ashamed of yourself. “And you call yourself a pastor?” How many times have I heard that one when I’ve refused cash for gas.

But what is even more shocking in this story is that the only one who dared to stop was the least expected of the three travelers. Here is a Samaritan who took terrific risks, Jesus says, risking his own life, who acted like a neighbor to somebody in desperate need. Maybe you know that, underlying this story, the Samaritan was just about the furthest thing from a neighbor to the man left for dead on the Jericho Road. He was the least expected of the three travelers, least expected of anyone at all, to stop and act. From a Judean perspective, there was no such thing as a “good” Samaritan. There could never be such a thing as a “good” Samaritan. Don’t we say the same thing about certain people, certain families, certain races, certain classes of people?

The question which the legal expert asked of Jesus was always alive in his day: Who is my neighbor in this time and place? Some drew a tight circle in defining the neighbor. Others opened up the circle of

neighbors. But nearly everyone agreed that the neighbor could not include Samaritans. Centuries ago, the Samaritans had intermarried with the hated Assyrian occupiers of the north, so they were considered racially mixed half-breeds by the Judeans in the south. Samaritans opposed the rebuilding of Jerusalem and its temple following the Babylonian exile in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. They were considered heretics by the Jewish religious establishment. Samaritans worshiped at Mount Gerizim while Judeans worshiped at the Jerusalem Temple. Remember a couple Sundays ago, in the preceding chapter to this one, the Samaritans sent Jesus packing out of their village, wanting nothing to do with him because he had “set his face toward Jerusalem.”

Ritually unclean, socially outcast, religiously a heretic, the Samaritan is the very antithesis of the well-qualified, well-heeled, credentialed priest and Levite who passed by on the other side, not to mention the legal expert who tests Jesus with the question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” You see, the man who asks Jesus this question is a Bible expert and a professional in religious law. He knows the right answer; and yet, we see through the lense of this parable that having the right answers does not mean that one knows God. Students can pull a straight A average in Bible and still miss the point. Seminarians can be in the top ten of their class and not have a clue about what’s going on. Simply knowing in our heads what is the right thing to do does not mean we will do it. This parable is not about a change of mind, it is about a change of heart.

Jesus said, “Go and do.”

“Teacher, what must I do . . . ?”

And Jesus goes straight to Moses for the answer: “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. . . Do this and you will live,” Jesus says, echoing Moses.

“But the law is not that easy,” the expert insinuates. “The law is high above us and distant in time from us. It takes years of study to understand it, and even longer to do it. So, Jesus, explain to me just who exactly is my neighbor.”

And yet, this Deuteronomy text says that “The commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven . . . Neither is it beyond the sea . . . No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.”

Then Jesus gives this religious law professional a sermon that he can see. The sermon that Jesus gives is as close as the man lying in the ditch, as real as the fear we feel when someone approaches us in the dark, as near to us as the people we walk past without noticing, as familiar to us as the smell of a Band-Aid on torn skin. The command is as close to us as our neighbor.

“And, who is my neighbor?”

“For mercy's sake, look in the ditch.”

There is someone hurt. Do something. Do what Moses taught you. Do this, and you too will live.

“But I can’t,” we say.

“I won’t,” we say.

“I’m afraid,” we say.

“Let them do it themselves the way I did it,” we say.

“But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with compassion.”

Here, the whole story turns on this phrase, “He was moved with compassion.”

“Compassion,” as I’ve quoted recently from Fyodor Dostoevsky , “Compassion is the highest if not the only law of human existence”(from *The Idiot*).

The Samaritan dares to enter the world of the injured man. This is compassion: daring to enter the world of another person, enabling us to feel deeply the suffering of another, moving us from silent observer to suffering servant.

Robert Wuthnow of Princeton once conducted some research about why some people are generous and compassionate, while others are neither. He found out that for many generous and compassionate

people something had happened to them. Someone had acted with compassion toward them, and this experience had transformed their lives so that they could act with compassion toward others. And it begins to sound a whole lot like God's love for us in Jesus who laid down his life for us. Jesus is the one who has been neighbor to you. The crucified is the one who has been neighbor to you. We are the person in the ditch, the one who lies helpless and wounded beside the road, the one who needs to be bandaged up and taken to a place of rest, the one who needs to be saved. And along comes a good Samaritan, a good Samaritan whose name is Jesus. He is despised and rejected like that Samaritan. Yet he comes to rescue us, speak tenderly to us, lift us into his arms, and take us to the place of healing.

“But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.”

God saw us in the ditch and had compassion.

“Go and do likewise.”