

SERMON
Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 15
July 11, 2010

Deuteronomy 30:9-14
Psalm 25:1-10
Colossians 1:1-14
Luke 10:25-37

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

My name is Wasef, and I am a modern day Samaritan. You may be surprised to hear that, because many people think that we only live in the pages of the Bible. However, even to this day there are a little over 700 of us still living near Mount Gerizim, our holy mountain in the region still bearing the name of our forefathers, Samaria.

Technically, we are Palestinians and we actually have a seat in the Palestinian parliament. We are confined to our compound by the Israeli authority, and because of security concerns, people of the outside world have little access to us, and we have little access to them.

We have been in this area since at least the 6th Century BC and have endured centuries of hatred and persecution. Our home is the ancient Shechem, where the Northern and the Southern Kingdoms split after King Solomon's death. My ancestors were part of the Northern Kingdom.

Following the Northern Kingdom's fall to Assyria in 721 BC, exiles from many nations settled in Samaria. They created something of a melting pot. Therefore, no longer were we purely Jewish.

A few hundred years later, the Babylonians conquered the Southern Kingdom. And, as was the custom of that day, the people were carried off into exile to prevent any uprisings in the occupied territory.

We, living in Samaria however, were not considered a threat due to our now diverse culture, so we were left in Palestine. Even so, we kept our allegiance to Moses' Torah and established our own temple on Mt. Gerizim.

Well, seventy years passed, and our brothers and sisters from the Southern Kingdom were finally allowed to return to their homes. We, in Samaria were ready and willing to welcome them back. But we were shunned. For over the years, we had intermarried with gentiles (non-Jews). Therefore, we were looked down upon for perverting the race.

We had also perverted the religion according to those returning from exile. For we looked to Mt. Gerizim in our own land as the place to worship God – not Jerusalem which was located in the Southern Kingdom. We also interpreted the Torah differently than our Jewish kin to the south.

Therefore, down through the centuries, we were persecuted by Jews, who destroyed our sanctuary in 170 AD; by Muslims, who called us atheists; and by Christian crusaders, who took our city as their second capitol, and called it Naples (now corrupted to Nablus).

If it were possible for you to visit us, you could drink from Jacob's Well, or see where Abraham built his altar to God after being promised this land for his descendants. You could even visit us on Passover when we still sacrifice lambs according to our ancient tradition.

We have proposed our mountain and community center as a site for peace talks between Palestine and Israel. Why should they have to go to Oslo or Camp David when they can come right here to explore their differences?

We feel that we have a special claim to serve as peacemakers because almost 2000 years ago, your prophet, Jesus of Nazareth, lifted up the name of "Samaritan" as peacemaker and caregiver to the world. He did this at great risk to his reputation because even at his time, we were regarded by the Jews as the villains. However, your prophet turned us into heroes before the whole world, and for that we will never forget him.

Hopefully, these words of a modern day Samaritan are helpful in understanding the parable of Jesus that we heard in our Gospel reading. Essentially, by the time Jesus walked on the earth, Samaritans were hated by the Jews. Some Jews would even go miles out of their way to avoid walking on Samaritan soil.

So this is the situation into which Jesus is questioned. An expert in the Law of Moses comes to Jesus and asks; “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus responds by asking the man what is written in the law. He responds by quoting the law to love God and love your neighbor as yourself. But, then he seeks to further clarify by asking; “who is my neighbor?”

So Jesus tells a parable: “there is a robbed and beaten man lying in the ditch. No doubt, he was a Jew. A Priest passes him by. Then a Levite passes him by. But a Samaritan stops to help. Jesus asks the lawyer; “which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?”

The lawyer bites his tongue, gulps, and says in a sheepish voice, “the one who showed him mercy.” AMAZING, isn’t it? The concept of a GOOD Samaritan is so distasteful, that the lawyer cannot even bring himself to speak the name “Samaritan!” And then Jesus says, “Go and do likewise.”

Now whenever we hear a parable from Jesus, we always try and figure out the characters in the story. “Who’s who?” we ask. Where do I fit into this story? And, can this story say anything to my life? So let’s take a look.

I would guess that most of us would have a hard time identifying with the Priest or the Levite. After all, we would never leave a suffering person to die as we walk past. Now, I could go off on a whole other sermon talking about how we respond to suffering in our world. But instead, for now, let’s just say that we really believe that the Priest or Levite do not represent you or me.

So what about the Samaritan? Well, I believe that all of us, at one time or another, has acted like the Samaritan in the story.

I have seen it many times over and over again right here at Atascocita Lutheran Church. We can talk about how we feed the hungry and provide housing for the homeless. We can discuss how we send money to help people affected by disease, hunger and natural disasters. But then we run the risk of becoming prideful and self righteous which makes us no better than the Priests and the Levites.

So instead, I would like us to look at how we can identify with the man lying in the ditch – the one who was beaten down – the one who was ignored. You see, we can relate to this person, because all of us have felt this way at some point in our lives.

Perhaps we have felt beaten down in our jobs. You know how it is. The times when we don't get the promotion that we know we deserve. Or the times when the company decides that we are too old and determines that they can hire younger people at a lesser salary.

We feel beaten down when people who claim to love us, put us down or betray us. We feel beaten down when we try to pay our bills and find that there is just too much month left over for the money.

There are times when we feel beaten down when one health issue after another seems to be plaguing us or a loved one. Just when we get one part of our body taken care of, it seems that another part decides to give out. Or maybe we feel beaten down from trying to raise loving and caring children in a world that is filled with hatred and violence.

Sometimes, when we feel this way, we don't want anyone to know about it. We just try and deal with it ourselves. We come to worship and say everything is just hunky dory. When people ask, "How's it going?" we say, "oh, just fine." When inside, we are just barely holding things together – just trying to keep our head above water.

It's like the man in the parable who was lying in the ditch. He could have purposely stayed quiet and tried to hide himself so that no one would discover him. But somebody did.

It was someone who took the time to care for him – to show him love. This person would come to be known as “The Good Samaritan.”

You see, eventually, we will come to the realization that the ditch is just too deep. And therefore, we must get help from outside ourselves. We must admit that we are vulnerable.

And I think that this is what today’s parable is trying to convey. Perhaps the Samaritan in this story is Jesus. Jesus, the one who comes to lift us out of the ditches in our lives. You know, the places where we feel beaten and left alone.

Maybe it is Jesus who reaches his hand down to us and says; “Grab on – come to me. I will care for you. I will heal you and make you whole again. I will do whatever it takes to bring you back to life again.”

Of course, Jesus is not physically with us in that way anymore. So instead Jesus uses you and me and all those who seek justice and peace in the world. For after Jesus told the parable, he said four crucial words, “Go, and do likewise.” “Go, and do likewise.”

I would like to close with the following illustration. Robert Wuthnow, a professor at Princeton University, once conducted some research about why some people are generous and compassionate, while others are not. He found out that for many compassionate people, something had happened to them. Someone had acted with compassion toward them and this experience had transformed their lives.

For example, Wuthnow tells the story of Jack Casey, a rescue squad worker, who had little reason to be a Good Samaritan. Casey was raised in a tough home, the child of an alcoholic father. He once said, “All my father ever taught me is that I didn’t want to grow up to be like him.”

But something happened to Jack when he was a child that changed his life – changed his heart. He was having surgery one day, and he was frightened.

He remembers the surgical nurse standing there and compassionately reassuring him. “Don’t worry,” she said to Jack, “I’ll be here right beside you no matter what happens.” And when Jack woke up again, she was true to her word and still there standing right beside him.

Years later, Jack Casey, now a paramedic, was sent to the scene of a highway accident. A man was pinned upside down in his pickup truck, and as Jack was trying to get him out of the wreckage, gasoline was dripping down on both of them. The rescuers were next to him using power tools to cut the metal, meaning that one spark could have caused everything to go up in a ball of flames.

The driver was frightened, crying out how scared he was of dying. Jack remembered what had happened to him long ago on the operating table, how that nurse had spoken tenderly to him and stayed with him. So he said and did the same thing for the truck driver, “Look, don’t worry,” Jack said, “I’m right here with you, I’m not going anywhere.”

Days later, the rescued truck driver said to Jack, “You know, you were an idiot. The whole thing could have exploded and we would have both been history!” “I just couldn’t leave you,” Jack said.

You see, something had happened to Jack Casey that transformed him – that made him a Good Samaritan. This is the message of the parable.

The Good Samaritan’s in our lives transform us into being Good Samaritans ourselves. As Paul said, while we were still God’s enemies, God saw us in the ditch and had compassion, and in Jesus came to save us.

So, the question is not the lawyer’s, “Who is my neighbor?” The question is, “who has been a neighbor to me?” And how can I “go and do likewise?” Amen.

May the peace that passes all understanding be with you now and for life everlasting. Amen.