

October 9, 2016

Second Presbyterian Church, Baltimore

A Sermon on the Good Samaritan Luke 10

“Just then an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?”

He answered, “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.”

And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’

Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?”

He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

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You’ve likely heard this story that Jesus once told before, perhaps many times over, but who knows.... maybe not. This was an ‘old’ text given us to work on, as I was at a Preaching Conference this past week, to see how new breath could be breathed into it, how new life might emerge in our telling an old, and in hearing in it something anew.

This was part of some group work we did, in looking at a lot of ‘old texts with new ears’ - telling them and listening to them in light of how people hear them when they come to church.

Our leader began her introductory talk considering two categories of people, then expanded that set to four. She began with the ‘nones and dones’. The nones are those who on surveys check off the box ‘none’ - where it’s asked about one’s religious preference.... and the ‘dones’ are those who have ‘been there, done that- or so they say, in reference to church.

Then she added to this list four new categories; all pretty interesting, in fact. The “No Ways”, the “No Longers”, the “Never Haves” and the “Not Yets”. (This must be a valid theory, she joked, because all the categories begin with the same letter.) For clarification, the No Ways are those who left the church because they were either very angry or were

totally burned out. The No Longers are the folks who, as they say have ‘hatched, matched & dispatched their children, and now have moved along in life, doing their own thing, as they say...

The Never Haves are folks who haven’t been to church in a long time, maybe they were kids of the No Longers, and they could potentially be interested in a religious journey for themselves. The Not Yets keep saying that this is something they should be doing, and want to do. They are deeply curious and not at all hostile to the church. They just haven’t set time in their calendars for it yet.

So, for all these categories of people- the stories Jesus told have meaning. For some the meaning is plainly obvious, even ‘old hat’, perhaps with nothing new to be discovered, and even trite; for others the stories may come as new; revelations of a deep and holy mystery.

So let’s have another look at the story Jesus told of the Samaritan. I sat at a round table with our Bibles opened to this story... in a small group including some folks from California, Washington State, Nevada, Wisconsin, and the Rev. Ho Tan Quo, a from the Presbytery of Vietnam, representing 8,000 Presbyterians, largely centered in Ho Chi Minh City (but that’s another story).

We came up with a retelling of the story, something like this. A lawyer once came to Jesus with a question, looking to find the way to eternal life. His question wasn’t so much about life forever in heaven, but how his life of earth could be ‘charmed’, favorable, pain free—a paradise, as it were. He wasn’t trying to slit hairs with Jesus, but was rather looking for an answer he thought he already knew.

Jesus, knowing what was in his questioners’ mind (as always), knew what this seeker was really looking for, so he redirects the question, slightly changes the subject, and answers the question by telling a story.

The cast of characters is straightforward enough. A Priest, a Levite, a Samaritan, (regarded as a non-believer by some, but who in his own way was faithful and true), and, of course, a poor soul journeying on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho.

Beaten by robbers, stripped and penniless, the poor sojourner was left for dead in a ditch by the side of the road.

Then the procession begins. By all rights, one of the first two characters should stop, but they don't. Their holiness does not extend to this unfortunate on the side of the road. Excuses don't matter, apologies are beside the point, what's done is done, or not. But not all is lost.

Just when the poor victim thinks that there is no hope, that some new disaster will befall him with the appearance of wolves or another dangerous stranger, someone does arrive, and rather than ignoring or accosting him, he is merciful. Just when the poor, beaten man begins to imagine the worst, another mugging, or maybe something worse, he is lifted out of his ditch, tended and cared for by this unauthorized stranger who has come from out of nowhere. All he can say is thank you!- All he can think is that there must be a higher power! (and that the Higher Power is indifferent to the source from which all goodness flows.)

Jesus' closing word to this sermon is "Go and do likewise..." and all we tend to see in this story is the empty ditch. How it was that the victim found himself there, who the unnamed perpetrator must have been, the self-righteous priest & Levite, noses held high passing by it, all keep that ditch in the foreground. We imagine what the ditch might have looked like, or what other kinds of ditches people find themselves in, one way or another, and who comes to help them out, and why.

Or, perhaps, we pursue 'ditch-denial' exercises, asserting that it's really not so bad, after all, or that he brought it on himself (he shouldn't have been on such a dangerous road, you know, by himself, in the first place.) He could have avoided being in that ditch, if he had known what he was doing. Maybe we have a case of 'ditch denial' and dismiss all the times we've found ourselves in a ditch and someone has helped us out, and we find ourselves secretly scared that even invoking it might bring it on us again.

One thing we can all say, conclusively, is 'ditches happen.' There are lots of ways for lots of people to end up in lots of unexpectedly bad situations.

As an answer to a question about how to live life eternal; or how to avoid pain in life-an accident free life, Jesus' classic story tells us that maybe those ditches aren't so avoidable after all. Or if we're not the ones in the ditch, we can do something helpful for those who now find themselves in one.

Jesus told good and clever stories, not so much to meet the question that had come his way head on, but rather to use it as an opportunity to teach about the one who was the answer to all of these questions. Jesus talked about the goodness of his heavenly Father, in more ways and more often than we account for. Ever think about it that way?

One of our study team at the round table at our workshop, (Terry) shared another story as a rejoinder to this one, from just a week or so ago, from Madison, Wisconsin.

She was there on a football Saturday, the town chock full of fans. She was at a place called ‘Madison’s Happiest Corner.’ (Does anyone know it?) It sits at the end of a long line of shops, diners, nightspots & t-shirt stores, like in most big college towns, but there on that corner some street performers play, especially on football Saturdays.

There on the corner was an 11 year old girl, playing a violin, with her violin case in front of her, to collect any monies that may be tossed in for her. (She was good, but not amazingly good.)

But she was playing some pretty difficult pieces, she was surely an aspiring performer, reaching for the skies, clearly with high goals set for herself. As Terry shared this story, she remarked that she knew that she couldn’t stand there all that long, she had to get somewhere else, and that she had no cash on her, anyway. So, reluctantly, she started walking down the street.

Just after she got 40 feet away, a middle-aged man approached her with a wad of crumpled bills in his hand, and he asked her to drop them in the violin case in front of the little girl.

He was nice enough, well dressed, and polite about it. But, Terry had to ask herself, what was going on here? She had to figure out why & whether to say yes or no, all in a moment’s notice. What was going on here? Was he trying to manipulate her? Was this ‘stranger danger’, him trying to buy a favor, to coax her into some unknown temptation, to do her harm?

As she reevaluated her options and re-analyzed this scene, how it might play itself out, all in a flash, all she could come up with was that this man was the girl’s father, and he couldn’t be caught putting money in his own daughter’s violin case, he needed a stand in to do it for him.

He couldn't do it. So she needed to, for him, and she was only the one, for this moment, to do this.

As Terry nodded her head, he gave her a handful of crumpled bills. Quickly, she strode past the little girl still playing the violin, not even glancing up at her as she passed by.

And all the while, as much as Terry wanted to say something to this girl about how totally amazing her father was, what a generous, kind, thoughtful and caring man he surely must be. She wanted to walk up to that girl, grab her by the shoulders, and whisper, softly, gently, clearly these words so that she would remember them forever:

All she could do was think, and hope and pray that this is what the little girl now knows... and that it will make a difference in her life forever...

Someone invisible loves you very much

Someone invisible loves you very much.

Someone invisible loves you very much.

So may it be, for all of us, and for those whom we can reach out and share the care that has been given to us. In Jesus' name. Amen.