

July 11, 2010
Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Luke 10:25-37

Susan Cooke Kittredge
Charlotte Congregational Church

Who are You?

I'm going to ask you this morning to do something difficult: forget what you know about this parable. Forget that the Samaritan was "good," that he was generous and kind. Forget all the organizations that have claimed this parable to show how altruistic and loving they are. Let's try, if we can, to see beneath the surface of this story from a couple of different perspectives.

From the start let's be really clear about the relationship between the Jews and the Samaritans: they despised one another. Just two chapters earlier in Luke's gospel Jesus had tried to go into a Samaritan village and been denied entrance. Enraged by the rejection John and James, two of Jesus' chosen twelve, wanted to burn the village down in retribution. Not exactly loving of them, you'd have to agree.

The lawyer questioning Jesus is a smart fellow and seems genuinely concerned about how to live correctly in order to get to heaven. "What can I do to gain eternal life?" is the question that starts the whole tale. That is his goal and he wants to make sure that he follows the letter of the law—walks, if you will, the straight and narrow path to the pearly gates. Jesus actually asks him to answer his own inquiry by citing the Jewish law, which he does, responding correctly as Jesus affirms.

That's not quite clear enough for the lawyer though; he seems to be trying to find the limits of his liability. Who is his neighbor, and, by implication, who is not? How far does he have to go to fulfill the requirement and, conversely, at what point might he be no longer held accountable? He's a lawyer, this is how he is trained to think; we need to cut him some slack.

Jesus knows that lawyers can tie themselves in knots with words, so he ends the rhetorical reasoning and appeals not to his intelligence and erudition but to his heart.

The setting for the parable is the road from Jerusalem to Jericho and again

geography is important. Jerusalem, the city on the hill, is 2,500 feet in elevation and Jericho is 800 feet below sea level. The 23-mile road between the two cities is a barren, dry stretch of land. It was probably the site of many muggings and robberies. One wouldn't want to be out there alone at night; one might easily be set upon by thieves, as was the poor guy in this story. Interestingly enough, we aren't told who this character is; everyone else in the parable is clearly defined, but the victim, as is the case with so many victims, is left faceless. All we know about him is that he is half-dead.

Enter the priest and the Levite, those whom we have traditionally viewed as hardhearted and selfish, cold men with no compassion or mercy. Traveling along, they each see the half-dead, naked, and beaten man and both of them scurry away from him to the other side of the road.

Let's look for a moment at these men and consider their circumstances. Remember they have a pretty long walk ahead of them on an obviously dangerous road; they need to get to Jericho before it gets dark. Like the lawyer, they have a goal before them. Presumably they also have work to do in their roles as priest and Levite. According to Jewish law, if they so much as touch a dead person they will be rendered ritually unclean and unable to perform their duties for 7 days as Patty read earlier. If they help this man, they will have to give up their plans, do whatever they feel they need to for him and then turn around and go back to Jerusalem to be cleansed at the Temple before beginning their journey all over again next week. We can assume that they are needed in Jericho, that what they have to offer is of value and their intentions are good. Each weighs for himself the cost of aiding the poor man in the ditch and decides against it. Someone else is sure to come after them and see to the man, after all. So they cross over to the other side of the road—they put as much distance as they can between themselves and the stripped and beaten man.

How many times I have done this! I do it to greater and lesser degrees every day. I am a queen of justification. Like the lawyer, I can conjure in my mind great excuses for the limits of my liability. Driving down the road, seeing someone with the car hood up and smoke pouring from the engine, I say to myself, "Surely they know more about

engines than I do; I wouldn't be any help. I could call 911 but everyone has a cell phone these days, no doubt they have already called for assistance if they want it. And, I promised I would be at the hospital in half an hour."

Being a pretty organized person, I know for the most part what I plan to do each day. But part of being a minister is being available and flexible should the need arises. In a crisis I think I do a pretty good job of dropping everything, but what is indeed a crisis to someone else often does not appear so to me. Half dead, not dead; so I cross over to the other side of the road perhaps more than I should.

We are all at risk for this behavior, I think. We see our goals before us and are loathe to postpone them or alter our course significantly. It's easy to do with our children when they are young, to ignore them, because they are inclined to flail around in the ditch crying wolf a fair amount of the time. Part of the wisdom we gain as parents is knowing when they really are half-dead and when, on the other hand, they might do well to pick themselves up.

Some of us are actually inclined to ignore our bleeding family members more than the stranger by the side of the road. Others are so focused on binding the wounds of our family that we are blind to anyone else.

Like the lawyer, we seek to delineate the boundaries of our responsibility; we yearn for clear guidelines and achievable goals. The priest and the Levite weren't necessarily more honorable or wretched than you or I, but they had plans before them that might actually help quite a few people. It's easy to see how they might judge that heaving that to the wind for one sorry man who was probably going to die anyway, well, it just wasn't worth it.

The real trouble with this thinking is not just that the guy in the ditch is left half-dead, but we who cross over to the other side of the road are condemned to living half-alive. God save us from our narrow paths, our plans and best intentions. Perhaps, in fact, that is exactly what God tries to do every day: stir our hearts alive and awaken within us mercy and compassion. But like workhorses, we proceed with blinders on lest we get distracted by activity on the side of the road.

What do you pass by? What haven't you time for today? Whom do you leave alone?

Might it derail you to devote some time to researching the current state of the war in Afghanistan and Pakistans' involvement rather than maintaining some long-held position of withdrawal or continuation?

Have you taken the time to call someone you know to be depressed or lonely?

When was the last time you gave someone a gift for no reason? Or surprised your beloved?

I wonder if we formulate plans to mask a sense of emptiness, to silence the hollow echo in our souls. I suspect there isn't one among us who at sometime or another hasn't felt the clutch on the heart of yearning, yearning for meaning and fulfillment, yearning for God.

The priest and the Levite missed the opportunity at hand because they felt there was more awaiting them someplace else. They judged the present need less valuable, less worthy than what might yet lie ahead. In so doing they left someone to die and denied themselves the opportunity of being fully present, fully alive. Their lives were so cloaked in duty, responsibility and what lay ahead that they were deaf and blind to God's call, to the present bleeding at their feet. They cast aside mercy and compassion in favor of duty, expectation and facility.

There is a story I'd like to share told by James Moore, about a man who had a huge boulder in his front yard.

"He grew weary of this big, unattractive stone in the center of his lawn, so he decided to take advantage of it and turn it into an object of art. He went to work on it with hammer and chisel, and chipped away at the huge boulder until it became a beautiful stone elephant. When he finished, it was gorgeous, breath-taking.

A neighbor asked, 'How did you ever carve such a marvelous likeness of an elephant?'

The man answered, 'I just chipped away everything that didn't look like an elephant!'"

Moore says, “If you have anything in your life right now that doesn’t look like love, then, with the help of God, chip it away! If you have anything in your life that doesn’t look like compassion or mercy or empathy, then, with the help of God, chip it away! If you have hatred or prejudice or vengeance or envy in your heart, for God’s sake, and the for the other person’s sake, and for your sake, get rid of it! Let God chip everything out of your life that doesn’t look like tenderheartedness.”

(James W. Moore, *Some Things Are Too Good Not To Be True*, Nashville: Dimensions, 1994, p. 32)

We can identify with the priest and the Levite but I’d like to suggest that we might also see ourselves as the unnamed victim in the story as well. At some time or another, each of us has been felled by fate, by someone else, either friend or foe, and left half-dead in the ditch of our soul. This is what Barbara Brown Taylor calls, “The dirt floor basement of your heart.” (*Leaving Church.*) More often than we’d like to admit, we ourselves are responsible for our lowly state, we have robbed ourselves of joy, derailed our futures, compromised our lives. There are times when each of us feels nameless, worthless, cast aside.

One of the more interesting twists of this parable is that it is the victim’s enemy who saves him. The Samaritan, loathed by the Jew, rescues him. Not only that, it appears that his generosity knows no end. When he takes the beaten man to the inn, he gives the innkeeper enough money for one month’s housing and food and says, that’s not the end of it, I’ll be back. How much does it cost you to live for a month? How easily would you give that sum to a stranger or to your enemy? None of us really comes close to behaving like the Samaritan. But we are asked to entertain the idea that our enemy might save us. Love your enemy, Jesus says.

Who is your enemy? We are a nation at war; surely our enemies are clearly delineated. Are members of Al Qaeda our enemies? Hard not to think so, harder still to imagine that they might save us. Or is it? What can we learn from the grave and serious threat that this country faces? Unless we take the time to understand the very complicated lives and history of people in Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan who have lived their

lives in famine, war and oppression, there is little hope for an end to the mutual fear and loathing in which we are so gruesomely embroiled.

Who is your enemy? What threatens you? Sometimes our greatest threats come not from without but from within us. Are you plagued by some demon that seems to have hold of your psyche and behavior? I would suggest that you won't get out of the ditch until you reach out with open arms to that enemy and understand it and embrace it and rob it of its power. It is not our natural reaction to something that threatens us, but it is, I believe, the only way we can claim our enemy's power. We have to draw close to our fears, smell them, touch them, scratch them, and know them.

When the scientist Louis Pasteur was a little boy living in a small village in France, a wild wolf raged through his town spreading death and agony to many of his neighbors. As a result, Pasteur was terrified of all dogs, even a distant bark unsettled him. "I have always been haunted by the cries of those victims," he said time and again.

In 1882, however, at the age of 60, Pasteur gave up all his other studies to search for a cure for rabies. For three years, in spite of his deep-seated fears, he risked his life and sanity by living surrounded by mad dogs. In 1885 he tried the first injection of his developed serum on a small boy whose life seemed doomed. The boy lived. Turning towards his fear not only helped him to overcome it but also spread healing far and wide. (Adapted from esermons.com)

One might look at this parable and ask, with the lawyer, "Who is my neighbor?" But the answer is pretty clear from Jesus' point of view: it is everyone, even the people you despise. The real question is not who is your neighbor, but who are you? Will you cross over to the other side of the road? Will you keep first and foremost to your schedule and plans, hoping always for a better tomorrow? Will you turn from someone in need because you are supposed to be somewhere else or feel you have little to offer? How will you gain eternal life?

Jesus seems to be calling us all to the present, to this life. We gain eternal life in this living of each day to its fullest with compassion and love and tenderness, not just for the people we love, but for those we don't love at all.

I'd like to end with something from Frederick Buechner. He says,
"The love for equals is a human thing—of friend for friend, brother for brother. It is to love what is loving and lovely. The world smiles.

The love for the less fortunate is a beautiful thing—the love for those who suffer, for those who are poor, the sick, the failures, the unlovely.

This is compassion, and it touches the heart of the world.

The love for the more fortunate is a rare thing—to love those who succeed where we fail, to rejoice without envy with those who rejoice, the love of the poor for the rich, of the black man for the white man. The world is always bewildered by its saints.

And then there is the love for the enemy—love for the one who does not love you but mocks, threatens, and inflicts pain. The tortured's love for the torturer. This is God's love. It conquers the world." (*The Magnificent Defeat.*)

Amen.