

“HOW TO BE A NEIGHBOR”

Luke 10:25-37 July 14th, 2019

A young chaplain in training, overwhelmed and fatigued by the troubles of the patients she was seeing, was making rounds in the hospital with an elderly but good-humored and very vigorous chaplain.

“I have one question,” she asked the senior chaplain. “How do you remain so youthful when you listen day after day to all those terrible complaints and fears?”

“Who listens?” the older chaplain replies.

This morning we are beginning a new sermon series titled LIVING AS DISCIPLES. This is Week 1 and we start with the title “How to be a neighbor.”

Over the next four weeks, as we go through this study on Luke’s Gospel, we are going to be looking at four stories that help us better understand what it means to live as a disciple of Jesus Christ who is transforming the world. The four stories we will consider in this series are:

- ~The Parable of the Good Samaritan (today’s text)
- ~The Visit with Mary and Martha
- ~The Teaching on Prayer
- ~The Power of Possessions

Often when we read the parable of the Good Samaritan we miss the point of the story. In the parable, when the lawyer (who was not like a lawyer like we think of a lawyer, but really more like a seminary professor or highly educated clergyperson) correctly identifies the Samaritan as the neighbor, Jesus responds with the words, “That is the right answer; do this and you will live.”

When we read Jesus’ initial response we focus on the “do this.” And so, we interpret the parable to mean that Jesus is telling the lawyer (and us) to go and be good Samaritans by noticing those in need and helping them,. In other words, we think Jesus was telling the Good Samaritan to go and do something.

But I’d like to submit a different way of reading the story. I would suggest that maybe Jesus wasn’t telling this man to DO something as much as he was challenging him to SEE the world around him, especially its people, in a different way. To put it another way, perhaps it isn’t as much about what we do as it is about how we live.

When I was in training to be a Stephen Minister and then a Stephen leader, one of the precepts really stood out for me and it’s easy to remember! God cures; I care. We were all inclined to want to go into a situation and fix the problem. But our work really was not to DO something. Our job was to simply BE with our care-receivers. Our job was to sit beside people in a time of need and listen. Our role was to be a loving presence and to be living reminders of the grace of God shown in Jesus Christ.

It’s easy to see why we get focused on doing when we read the parable.

After all, the first question that the lawyer asked Jesus was a “do” question: “What should I DO to inherit eternal life?” And Jesus told him straight away what he should DO: “love the Lord God with all your heart and soul and strength and mind and your neighbor as yourself.” This is what we are to DO as followers of Jesus Christ. It is sort of like the proposed amendment to our mission statement. What we are to DO is make disciples of Jesus Christ.

The second question, the one that prompted Jesus to tell the parable, was not a DO question. It was a BE question. The lawyer wanted to know whom Jesus considered to BE his “neighbor.” It was in response to this second question that Jesus told the parable about the Good Samaritan. And Jesus’ meaning is clear. He told the lawyer in no uncertain terms that he must BE a neighbor to those he

considered ritually unclean, socially unacceptable, and morally corrupt.

To inherit eternal life, Jesus says, we must be in loving relationship with all of God's children, especially those with whom we disagree, would judge as sinful, or even despise. As United Methodists, this is the "parable" that speaks to the second part of our mission statement. By living in this way, we participate in God's transformation of the world.

It seems to me that many of us have the same problem that the lawyer had. We think that the way to inherit eternal life is to DO something: say the right words, believe the right things, have the right kind of baptism, give the right amount of money, join the right church, live the right way, and do the right things in this life. In this way of thinking, we have complete control of our eternal destiny. We simply earn our way to eternal life by doing the right things. But Jesus says that the way to find eternal life is not by doing something, but by BEING something. Specifically, it is by being the kind of person the Good Samaritan was. Eternal life is discovered by living in the way of Christ for the transformation of the world.

What kind of person was the Samaritan? He was a person who, first and foremost, was neither frightened nor apathetic when he happened upon a situation of injustice in his community.

The text doesn't say why the Samaritan was walking the road from Jerusalem to Jericho that day. I don't know if he was on his way home from visiting relatives or heading to work. But my guess would be that he was not out on a mission to do justice that day. He was not on a mission trip, or on his way to volunteer at the local food pantry, or headed to Wednesday night fellowship at his church. In other words, he was not specifically engaged in being his "church self" at that moment.

The other two people who saw the robbed, wounded and half dead man lying on the side of the road are specifically named as church people. One is a priest and the other is a Levite. But we don't know anything about the Samaritan other than his status as a Samaritan. Luke does not say he was a leader among the Samaritans. He is not identified as a priest, or even as a particularly observant Samaritan. The only thing we know about him personally is that he is a member of a group that is a despised rival of the Jews. And we know from the story that he was traveling along a well known road, minding his own business, when suddenly he came upon a situation of violence and injustice happening right before his eyes. He saw a man who had been hurt, and his response was not to run in the other direction, but rather to immediately go to the side of this victim of a senseless crime and offer his assistance.

He is so moved with pity that he stops his travel plans in order to care for this man. He didn't call for someone else, some professional, to come to the man's aid. He didn't summon the police or an ambulance. He personally cleaned and bandaged the man's wounds, and then he loaded the individual on his own horse and carried the man to an Inn, where he presumably paid for a room and stayed with the man and nursed him overnight. The next day, he paid for the man to be able to stay there and rest until he was recovered. He asked the innkeeper to keep an eye on the man. And he promised to pay for any additional time the wounded man needed to stay beyond the days he paid in advance.

This Samaritan didn't just do something for this wounded stranger. He took time away from whatever it was he had planned to do that day. He let an encounter with injustice change his course of action entirely. He delayed the remainder of his trip in order to stay and sit with the man until he knew the man would be OK. And he promised to come back and check on him.

Now I don't know about you but I would have second thoughts about stopping to help someone broken down on the side of the road or picking up a hitch-hiker in the world we live in these days. I might look around to see if there was someone else who would respond to their need. I might not want to take time away from my own plans, nor do I want to make myself vulnerable. Furthermore,

if I saw someone in what looked to be a dangerous situation, someone who had been beaten, or had been shot or wounded, I'm not sure what I would do. I would probably pull over and call the police, but I'm not sure I'd approach the car. I'm just being honest here. My tendency is to think first about whether my actions might put me in danger.

When I think about my own responses to Jesus' challenge to us all to be a neighbor not just in situations in which we don't have much information, but to be willing to take risks of anyone in need, I know that I have some work to do in my own practice of potentially world-changing discipleship. Jesus calls us to put not just our time, but our money and our very lives on the table in order to make God's merciful presence known anytime and anywhere the opportunity arises.

Last Sunday when my message was the last one in the series on Pilgrimage and Celtic Spirituality, I spoke of St. Columba coming to Iona and finding a renewed vision of his mission in the world. I ended with a request for you to reflect during the week ahead "of your own vision of Christ and how that vision takes form in your life." This Sunday as part of that visioning I ask "How are you responding to God's call to be the kind of neighbor who is willing to offer God's mercy to all and how is that looking in your life right now? Are you willing to take the time away from your own plans and projects and reach out to someone in need? Would you be that listening ear when someone just wants to have someone care and be present for them?"

This story of the Good Samaritan isn't a story about finding easy opportunities to do some good works in our communities. It isn't even a story about answering the call to give substantially to support those in great need, or to sacrificially go and serve in places in the world where people suffer.

This is a story about how we are to live as disciples every single day, right here at home, in our own neighborhoods and churches. It is a call to see the needs of the people we meet on walk, or in the grocery store, or on our way to do something else, and to not think first about our own safety or our own agendas, but rather to live as people who willingly let the needs of the world around us interrupt our plans so that we never miss an opportunity to offer mercy to all of God's children. This, says Jesus, is how we transform the world. "

Our mission statement on the front of our bulletins every Sunday is "Steadfastly sharing God's unending love and redeeming grace through open minds, open hearts, and open doors with our community and the world." With God's help may we learn and grow in our visions about being "a good neighbor." Amen and amen.