

Circle of Mercy Sermon
Luke 10:25-37
July 17, 2016

Drawing Near

I had selected this text several weeks ago, knowing that - *The Many* - the music group from Chicago would be leading us in a service filled primarily by music last week. I didn't know that Lenora was going to offer her reflection on this text. But, I decided to stay with this text anyway because I don't think it's finished with us – in this moment in our world, our nation and our local community. I know that it's not finished with me yet.

I have to be honest, my heart and mind are a jumbled mess at the moment. Words do not seem sufficient at all in the face of the systemic racism, injustice, oppression and violence faced by our sisters and brothers and friends and community day in and day out – injustice, oppression and violence that we mostly know about from a distance.

Abby and I were outside playing yesterday, when our next-door neighbors started firing semi-automatic guns off their back porch. This happens pretty frequently. It's just never been right next-door. It had actually started the night before around

9:30. After we quickly went inside the house, Abby had a lot of questions. But words failed me when she asked, “Am I going to get killed, Mommy?”

The reality is that the guns were not pointed at us. The guns will likely never be pointed at us. This isn't an everyday occurrence for us. But I had no idea how to answer her question, other than to hold her close and tell her to come inside if she hears those noises again.

I want to be clear here – I am under no illusion that this experience in any way gives me even an inkling of what the lived experience is like for people toward whom guns are often pointed. What it did give me was that punched in the gut feeling of not knowing how to answer this pointed and terrifying question from my child.

As I've read this sermon over and over, I've nearly scrapped the whole thing three or four times. I don't know what to say. But I'm going to do my best because we have to speak. My friend Lyndsey reminded me today, “And, really, words aren't sufficient, but they are a place to start, and they need to be said to break the silences and challenge our hearts, feelings, and actions again and again. So in speaking you are doing some of the work, even if the words aren't perfect. Perfect

is a tool of white supremacy, oppression and violence that just keeps us from acting.”

I keep reminding myself of this. I will keep trying to speak and trust that it is enough for this moment as we lament and try to act and keep trying to live into the hope and mercy of God, who is able to abundantly more than we can even ask or imagine. So, these are my imperfect thoughts about a story that we know well.

The parable of the “Good” Samaritan is familiar to us all. We heard it last week in Lenora’s story about her family camping trip. We watched as our kids acted it out with Nancy during the Children’s Story time in worship.

The language of this story shows up frequently in our culture and even in our laws. There are *Good Samaritan* laws that protect individuals who offer assistance to others in an emergency situation on the basis of implied consent (should the party in need of help be unable to offer conscious consent).

The *Federal Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act* was instituted to offer protection from liability when food is donated to non-profit organizations to be distributed to people in need. This is the very law that enables 12 Baskets Café

and Food Connection to receive the hundreds of pounds of excess food each week from restaurants and catering companies in Asheville – food that they then distribute to AHOPE, Beloved House, the Rescue Mission and many other organizations who, in turn, distribute the food to folks in our community who need it. There are *Good Samaritan* clinics and hospitals across the world. There’s even Samaritan’s Purse, Franklin Graham’s organization.

This story crosses boundaries, challenges assumptions, calls us to action, and, I would argue, calls us to learn how to receive.

Most of the time, I think we are not asking the right questions – or maybe we are not asking enough questions when we talk about this parable.

As I have been thinking about this parable over the past few weeks, I was grateful to find the work of theologian Amy-Jill Levine, a New Testament professor at Vanderbilt University, on this very topic. She makes several important points that help us hear the story as people in the first century would have heard it:¹

¹ Amy-Jill Levine, “Go and Do Likewise,” *America: The National Catholic Review*, September 29, 2014. (Points 1-6 summarized from Levine’s article.)

- (1) If we hear the text only as a story about how to be compassionate for another person, we mis-read it. We have to examine how centuries of anti-Jewish interpretations have impacted our understanding of this story, and many others in the New Testament.

- (2) Even the term “good” being used to identify the Samaritan is problematic. We refer to this story today as the “Good” Samaritan without a second thought, when in reality this implies that this one Samaritan was “good,” when compared with all of those who were not. Today, this would be the equivalent of saying “good” Catholic or “good” Muslim or “good” Baptist.

- (3) The lawyer’s question was really a polite way of asking, “Who is NOT my neighbor?” He’s looking for an answer that enables him to know who the people are who do not deserve his love. “According to Jewish law, the lawyer is responsible for loving those like him and those who are not like him who live in proximity to him...In Jewish thought, one could not mistreat the enemy, but love was not mandated...Only Jesus insists on loving the enemy.”²

² Ibid.

- (4) It is often assumed that the Levite and Priest passed by due to their commitment to ritual purity laws involved in touching a corpse. But the man in the ditch was not dead. It would not have been a violation of purity laws to help a man who was injured. What is clear about the Priest and Levite is they were concerned primarily about themselves – not the man in the ditch.
- (5) Jesus probably surprised his audience with the Samaritan entering the scene, which shouldn't surprise us. He was always throwing these kinds of curve balls. Often, the Samaritan was characterized as one who was oppressed and despised. But Levine points out those hearing Jesus would have seen the Samaritans as the enemy, the ones who did the oppressing, and “from the perspective of the man in the ditch, Jewish listeners might have balked at the idea of receiving aid from a Samaritan. They might have thought, ‘I’d rather die than acknowledge that one from that group saved me.’”³
- (6) In the Gospel of Luke, mercy is portrayed an action of God. After telling the parable, Jesus asked the lawyer, “Who of these three men was the neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” It is telling that the

³ Ibid.

lawyer couldn't even bring himself to say that it was the Samaritan who was the neighbor to the man in the ditch. Instead, he said, "the one who showed him mercy." In doing this, he acknowledges that the Samaritan is the one who acts as God does, with mercy.⁴

In his final speech just before he was assassinated, given to a group of sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee, Martin Luther King, Jr. referenced and reframed this parable in a way that takes us to a much deeper question in this text. King's words call us to be honest, to look hard within ourselves, and to develop what he called a "dangerous unselfishness."

When the lawyer asked Jesus the question, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus asked him, "What does the law tell you?" The lawyer answered correctly, "You shall love the Lord with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." Jesus affirmed his answer and told him to go and do this kind of love and that he would then live.

⁴ Ibid.

But the lawyer wasn't satisfied with Jesus' response. He wanted to know exactly what to do now, how to live right now – in order to be in God's favor for eternity. And isn't this desire alive among us today? Don't we wish that someone would tell us exactly what to do?

Like us, I think the Lawyer already knew what the implications of embodying this kind of love would mean, and he wasn't quite ready to just “go and do what Jesus had instructed him to do.” Instead, he came back at Jesus with a follow up question, to make sure he knew the parameters of what he was being asked to do – “Who is my neighbor?”

And this is where Martin Luther King, Jr.'s reframing of the story, gives us a little bit of a different angle from which to see. This is a lengthy quote, which I think needs to be heard in its entirety:

“But Jesus immediately pulled that question from mid-air, and placed it on a dangerous curve between Jerusalem and Jericho. And he talked about a certain man, who fell among thieves. You remember that a Levite and a priest passed by on the other side. They didn't stop to help him. And finally a man of another race came by. He got down from his beast, decided not to be compassionate by proxy.

But he got down with him, administered first aid, and helped the man in need.

Jesus ended up saying, this was the good man, this was the great man, because he had the capacity to project the "I" into the "thou," and to be concerned about his brother.

Now you know, we use our imagination a great deal to try to determine why the priest and the Levite didn't stop. At times we say they were busy going to a church meeting, an ecclesiastical gathering, and they had to get on down to Jerusalem so they wouldn't be late for their meeting. At other times we would speculate that there was a religious law that "One who was engaged in religious ceremonials was not to touch a human body twenty-four hours before the ceremony." And every now and then we begin to wonder whether maybe they were not going down to Jerusalem -- or down to Jericho, rather to organize a "Jericho Road Improvement Association." That's a possibility. Maybe they felt that it was better to deal with the problem from the causal root, rather than to get bogged down with an individual effect.

But I'm going to tell you what my imagination tells me. It's possible that those men were afraid. You see, the Jericho road is a dangerous road. I remember when Mrs. King and I were first in Jerusalem. We rented a car and drove from Jerusalem

down to Jericho. And as soon as we got on that road, I said to my wife, "I can see why Jesus used this as the setting for his parable." It's a winding, meandering road. It's really conducive for ambushing. You start out in Jerusalem, which is about . . . 2500 feet above sea level. And by the time you get down to Jericho, fifteen or twenty minutes later, you're about 800 feet below sea level.

That's a dangerous road. In the days of Jesus it came to be known as the "Bloody Pass." And you know, it's possible that the priest and the Levite looked over that man on the ground and wondered if the robbers were still around. Or it's possible that they felt that the man on the ground was merely faking. And he was acting like he had been robbed and hurt, in order to seize them over there, lure them there for quick and easy seizure. And so the first question that the priest asked -- the first question that the Levite asked was, "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?" But then the Good Samaritan came by. And he reversed the question: "If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?"⁵

The Samaritan's actions in the story differed from the Priest and the Levite, in that paid attention and responded. He saw beyond himself, and he extended mercy. He was willing to go near the man. He was willing to touch his body, to treat and bind

⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr. *I Have Been to the Mountaintop* speech – Memphis, Tennessee.

his wounds. In this story, we are reminded that God cares about bodies. God draws near to bodies. God took on a body in the person of Jesus – Immanuel God with us. Jesus drew near to bodies. People sought him out for healing – for sight, for life, for liberation. In this story we are reminded that we are called to care for bodies – wherever there is violence or injury or pain or trauma or death.

The questions posed by King are the very questions that paralyze us, bind our hearts and minds and bodies and keep us from engaging, responding, drawing near. We remain paralyzed when we operate from these very questions:

- If I stop to help this person, what will happen to me?
- If I speak up in a situation of injustice, what will happen to me?
- If I act now, what will the cost be for me?

When I read the scripture a few minutes ago, I asked you to hear the story and to think about where you found yourself in it – to really try to place yourself in the scene. If you were able to do this, where in this parable did you place yourself? Where did you imagine you were in the scene? Were you the Levite, the Priest, the Lawyer, the innkeeper? Were you a bystander in the crowd, listening to the lawyer who was questioning Jesus? You can tell us if you saw yourself as Jesus?

But in all seriousness – this is a central question for us to ask ourselves in this text. Think about all the times you have heard this parable, listened to sermons about it, studied in it Sunday School, heard it referenced in our wider culture – and who are we expected to identify with?

We tend to identify ourselves with the helpers – the usual interpretation is for us to see how we might be acting like the Levite or the Priest and to try to be more like the “Good” Samaritan. We focus on what the Levite and the Priest didn’t do that they should have done, ultimately putting ourselves in the role of the “Good” Samaritan, as ones who, at least try to, do the right thing and make the right choice. It’s a privileged perspective – placing ourselves in the roles of those who have the resources, capacity, and means to help – as the ones who are expected to help. We are conditioned to think this way.

Does it occur to us even to consider identifying with the man in the ditch – the one who needed help. The one who, if he was conscious enough, might have been asking the question, “What is going to happen to me if no one stops to help me?”

We tend to stay on the surface level of this story and all that it has absorbed – culturally, politically and theologically for over two thousand years.

Let's consider what it might mean for us to identify with the man in the ditch.

First of all, we do not have any information about his identity. He is not identified by his race, his religious affiliation, his nationality or his job title. Due to this, we don't have a sense of where his loyalties would have been. We don't know who he would have sided with in an argument about the law. We don't know what he would have thought about the Levite and Priest passing him by, and we have no idea how he would have responded to receiving the help of a Samaritan, had he been able to respond in some way. I don't know if this was intentional by the writer of Luke or not.

But the fact that the man is not described with any identifying characteristics at least opens the door to the possibility that we might actually be invited to identify with the man in the ditch. It could be any one of us.

Could being in the ditch enable us to recognize that we have something to learn about not being in the driver's seat, about not being able to control or choose from where or from whom our help comes? Could it be...

- that we are in desperate need of God's mercy drawing near to us
- that we are in desperate need of God's mercy coming to us from the most unexpected people and places

- that we are in desperate need of God's mercy reaching out to us to bind up our wounds

In this moment, can we consider we might actually be the ones in the ditch and that God is inviting us toward healing in these very moments when we feel paralyzed:

- when we don't know what to say
- when we don't know what to do
- when we have no idea how to proceed
- when we have more questions than answers
- when we need to take a backseat and follow the lead of others, when we are used to being the ones taking the lead
- when what is most needed from us is to show up and be present

If we are the person in the ditch and we begin to be pulled from the ditch through the mercy of God shown by those who come our way, we are being offered the chance to carefully consider and clarify where our loyalties lie. We are being offered the opportunity to decide if we are actually willing to let God draw near to us. We will be offered the opportunity live into what God drawing near to us will require of us. We are being called upon to resist and refuse to be complicit in any

and all systems of oppression and injustice. We are being called to show up when we don't know what else to do.

As our wounds are being bound up, let us begin (or continue if we already are) to work relentlessly mercy – and learn how not only to extend mercy but also how to receive it.

And may God not let us rest until every single mother in this world, no matter where she lives, can answer her child's question, "Am I going to get killed, Mommy?" with clear and unequivocal certainty, "No, my child, no."

Amen.