

Sermons at Christ Church

Reaching Out in Faith

Pentecost 5

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“And who is my neighbor?” Asked the bewildered lawyer. A lawyer came to Jesus with a nagging question “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” The lawyer knew that life on earth is not eternal and he also knew of the eternal life that God promises. He wants to attain that eternal life and he believes that he has done all that he is supposed to do to attain that life. But there’s this element of frustration. He thinks it is by his own effort and so he feels this depth of emptiness and so he comes to Jesus for answers. Help me fill the blank space, he says.

Based on Jesus question, this man quotes the Shema-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.” Jesus praises him. But there arises a much serious question “Who is my neighbor?” I believe the lawyer had neighbors like you and I do, he had friends like you and I do, he had colleagues like you and I do, and he knew people like you and I do. He may have come across strangers every day. But of all these people, who was his neighbor. In answering the question, Jesus tells the familiar story of the Good Samaritan.

In the story, you hear that when both the Priest and the Levite saw the injured man, they walked on the other side of the road because they were limited by the law. That same law which invites reverence and love for God and love of neighbor, had placed limits on people. The point that Jesus seeks to make with his teaching is that any law which supplants your desire to help another person in distress isn’t worth your obedience. Any law which places an undue burden on you, limits you or shackles you to the point where you are unable to see the value of another human being isn’t worth your reverence.

And so the question is, which limits has the law placed on you? Which bondage-be it spiritual or otherwise, keeps you from crossing over to the other side of the road-where the need is present? The other side of the road is where those who are near death lie, that is where you will find the sick,

hungry, poor, homeless, addicts, refugees, immigrants, LGBTQ, trafficked women, the Slave, those who live on the margins of our society-that is where ministry thrives and lives are restored.

Listen to Jesus “So if the Son shall set you free, you shall be free indeed.” Those who are in bondage are like the Priest and Levite. Those who are free are like the Samaritan-they can cross to the other side of the road-because they are burdened only by the demands of love. And because they are burdened by the demands of love, they don’t see any limitations in the way they act out their love because they choose to walk on the side of the road where there is injury.

Here’s a story of a former Slave-Belinda Sutton. Belinda was abducted in present day Ghana, where I come from. Belinda was sold into slavery and for decades served a wealthy Massachusetts family-the Royalls. Belinda demanded justice and filed a petition against the estate of the Royalls claiming that she deserved compensation for years of unpaid labor. Belinda won. The Massachusetts legislature awarded her an annual pension from the Royalls estate. Such a decision was rare in 1784 but the legislature felt free enough to cross the boundaries of racial injustice.

This is an example of being free enough to cross to the other side of the road, where real injury is. And there, on the other side of the road, we tend, we mend, we comfort and we bring wholeness.

A few days ago, I read an article by Lawrence Summers-Former Treasury Secretary during President Clinton’s tenure. The title of the article is “This Law Made Me Ashamed of My Country.” Part of Larry’s reflection was about his conversation with his two daughters who practice Social Work and medicine in rural New Hampshire. According to him, his daughters made him realize the devastating impact on rural hospitals as a result of the Medicaid cuts. This is what he said “They made me realize that a focus on macroeconomics, while valid, misses the human brutality that I now see as the most problematic aspect of the legislation.”

I have no issue with the wealthy. They played by the rules and made lots of money. I wish I had friends like that. But someone who throws a \$50 million wedding doesn’t need a single dime from the government. That is how the priest and the Levite behave-they walk the other way, they walk away from the injured man. And we are walking from the poor because we do not see the value of those in our society who actually need help.

As citizens, we don't have to pitch one against the other. But I want to believe that the vulnerable are visible to the government, and that the government cares about how the vulnerable live.

Those who are free are not burdened by categories of tribes, ethnicities, races, color and sex. They are not limited by the neighborhood in which they live. They don't feel shackled by their social status. They are not burdened by anything-even the law. They are moved by the sheer decency of the human story. They are moved by the grace that they find in each other.

They are moved by the excitement of putting a smile on the face of another person. They are moved by the enthusiasm in being good and in doing right by others; in meeting the needs of the vulnerable, in fulfilling the desires and hopes of the hopeless. They are moved by the joy of crossing the road to tend to another's need. They delight in the law that finds its fulfillment in love. To those people, those who are free, everyone is a neighbor, and so they don't ask who is my neighbor? They ask, how may I help?

The poet Percy Green has this to say "A man of words and not of deeds is like a garden full of weeds." Last week we welcomed our friends from LEMS. This week we welcome our friends from St. Luke's Youth Center. We want to be a community of deeds and so we build a relationships that offer hope and meaning to those who lay dead by the side of the road. Our relationship with them is about crossing to the other side of the road-that is where the real need is. That is where love happens and redemption is made possible.

Like the lawyer we are dissatisfied with the status quo of our lives. We have become disillusioned because we have done all that we can do but we still feel the depth of emptiness. Our religiosity doesn't provide us with the meaning that we want. The reason is, we have done the God part and abandoned the neighbor part.

Remember these two facts, one, to gain eternal life depends on the God who rescues you from bondage. Two, to gain eternal life is about the extent to which your religion moves you to act in mercy. Go and do likewise isn't about more religion or spirituality, it is about whether you find within you a reason to bring another person to life.

I am often tempted to believe that we are all half-dead laying by the side of the road- we all have issues of varying kinds.

You may be the lawyer whose injury is one of wondering who is neighbor is. You may be the robber whose injury is one of taking from the vulnerable. You may be the priest or the Levite whose injury is being subservient to the law.

You may be like the innkeeper whose injury is one of trusting that the Samaritan he probably didn't know would return to reimburse him.

You may also be like the Samaritan, who is free and unbound by any limitations, and with his freedom feels duty bound to extend mercy and compassion.

This is love that crosses to the other side of the road to show mercy and compassion-and if we are to do likewise, then we are to bring healing, comfort, mending and wholeness to all those who lay half-dead by the side of the road.

I heard about a cat and mouse that died on the same day and went to heaven. After a few weeks, Peter saw the mouse and asked how he liked it. The mouse said, it has been so great but it is so big I wish I could have a pair of roller skates. Peter said, well, that's no problem. Here are some skates. A few days later, Peter saw the cat and asked him how he liked it. It's fantastic, and just when I thought it couldn't get any better, I discovered the meals on wheels.

With the Samaritan story, Jesus makes this point, you are not present until someone says you are, you are not alive until someone says you are. Truth is, our lives have no meaning in themselves by themselves alone. Our worth and value is derived from the other-neighbor. Value is present when through acts of conscious love we affirm the essence of another-the neighbor. Value cannot be present when our attachment to norms blind us and limits our freedom to act in mercy to the neighbor.

It is for this reason that Jesus argues, if the Samaritan had any value at all, his value was determined by the stricken man laying half-dead by the side of the road. With all that he had, he

gave value unto himself by offering value, dignity and worth to the stricken man. The actions of the Samaritan simply affirm that the love of neighbor is the measure of the law.

In just the same way, you also give value to yourself by the value you give to your neighbor- whoever that neighbor may be.

If the law would find any fulfillment, it has to find that fulfillment in compassion and mercy. And that fulfillment comes about only when we are free enough to crossover boundaries to offer life to ourselves by offering life to our neighbors- whoever those neighbors may be.

Amen.