

Amos 7:7-17
Psalm 82
Colossians 1:1-14
Luke 10:25-37

Proper 10C
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island
July 14, 2019
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We Are All Neighbors

We know this story – or we think we do, don't we? It's the story of ...

Yes, it's the story of the good Samaritan which is perhaps one of the best-known stories Jesus ever told. Like St Francis and the birdbath, the Good Samaritan is a social construct even in our profoundly secular and religiously irritable culture. I asked some non-church people recently if they knew the story Jesus told about the Samaritan who saved the life of a traveler who had been beaten nearly to death and they said "no." Then I asked if they knew who the good Samaritan was and what he had done, and they said "no." When I asked if they knew the term good Samaritan, they all said "Sure, of course we do." "What is a good Samaritan," I asked? "Someone who helps," they said. "Someone who does the right thing."

It's not a bad interpretation of the story – we do in fact, get a good picture of what it is to do the right thing, or at least a picture of one man doing one right thing in one particular circumstance about two thousand years ago in a culture we cannot possibly understand. So while we all think we know so much about this very familiar story, I'd like for us to suspend our alleged knowledge as well as our judgment and assumptions about it, just for the next few minutes, because I think, if we do that we will open ourselves to the vastness of this story, to things far beyond a simplistic morality tale. This is a story about morals, to be sure. But it is a story about so much more.

The story of the Good Samaritan happened in a place called Jericho, one of the most ancient towns in the Holy Land. If you're old enough, you might remember singing about Joshua and the battle of Jericho and all the walls coming tumbling down. I sang that song with great gusto as a little girl, but my gusto came from being enamored of someone who could blow a trumpet and make walls fall down. Nobody taught me about the reality that Joshua and his army killed every man, woman and child there who didn't agree with him, save the prostitute and her family who had sheltered him and his people. And while we need not go down that story road today, we do need to recognize that when Jesus began telling this story in Jericho, something profoundly dangerous and deadly and ugly was in the air. Jericho was a scary place, a stop on a trade route famous for its wheelings and dealings and notorious for its pleasures and dangers. It was no place for anyone like you or me. The only people who navigated that terrifying route on their own were people on a mission to move themselves or their wares from here to there. No one was out for a stroll. The people who lived on the Jericho trade route were careful – very, very careful and they kept themselves to themselves. They'd seen their share of murder and mayhem, and they'd seen an extra measure too.

When we have a bit of the backstory of that place and its people, it's easier to understand how somebody could be jumped and robbed, beaten to a pulp and left for dead without a lot of people rushing to the rescue. Actually, maybe that's how it is in a lot of places these days. The trouble with hard and harsh places is that people expect things to be horrifyingly ugly and so when they are, nobody blinks. Murder, robbery, beatings and all manner of other unspeakable

behavior are to be expected in places like Jericho or Tacoma or Seatac or Tukwila or Bremerton or Port Orchard. After all, they're the places with the most criminal activity in all of Washington. What am I supposed to do about any of that? What are you? If we to do something more than make a morality tale out of the story of the good Samaritan, what are we to do?

We think the story of the good Samaritan is about the one guy who did the one right thing at the one right time and was able to make history because of it. He was the alleged bad guy because he was a foreigner, and not just a foreigner, a Samaritan - one of the people who was despised by the Jews, one of the people who claimed to worship the one God but didn't do that according to the laws the one God had laid out, didn't worship in the temple and the only one who, as far as we know, even cast a sideways glance at the world around him, which happened to include a dying man. He was one of the outcasts and the very last person on earth you would ever want to lay hands on you, or God forbid, save your life. You know who I'm talking about.

But this isn't really a story about that Samaritan. It's a story about you and me. It's a story about all the opportunity in the world to do the right thing and the many ways we find to distract ourselves to avoid doing that. Oh, not that we mean to. I'm not suggesting that we're bad people or that we don't care about all the evil or difficulty in the world, I know for a fact that we do. What I am suggesting is that there is a bit of the lawyer in most of us. We take great comfort in the rules and great pride in being the ones who keep those rules best. It's what the priest and the Levite in this story did. They followed the rules, religious rules at that, and if rule followers had been the only ones who had walked by that day, the poor man who had been beaten nearly to death would surely have died. It is not lost on me that the one person who did anything to help was someone who completely and totally broke some of his culture's most important religious rules.

We're told the priest and the Levite could not possibly have gone near that man who'd been left for dead. And why? Because there was some possibility that he really was dead. And dead people were ritually unclean. Priests and Levites were the most ritually clean people around. They served in the temple and there were more purity codes for them than you can possibly imagine, plenty of them having to do with defilement. As it turns out, if the priest or the Levite had gone near a dead body, they would have been rendered ritually unclean and unable, for some significant period of time, to do their jobs. Think about that. The religious people's rules were such that following those rules rendered them utterly inhumane. It would be one of the world's greatest jokes if it weren't so horrifying. By insuring their perfect cleanliness, they were incapable of offering kindness or compassion or mercy. These were some of the most religious people of their time. The man who lay dying in the ditch was one of their own. And I have to say that I can't get past the reality that their religion was the reason they gave for walking away from someone they had every opportunity to help, even to save. It's heartbreaking, and it's antithetical to anything a loving God would want from us or for us. Like the lawyer who wanted to know who his neighbor was, those religious people had a perfect reason not to have to care for that dying man. If we can just render people unclean enough, if we can ensure that they are not included as one of the neighbors we're supposed to love just as we love God - well, we won't really need to do anything at all to love them. We are all neighbors, period. I learned that from Jesus and from Mr. Rogers.

Our neighbor is anyone in need. Not just the person who lives next door, not just the political supporters we agree with, not just the friends we have lunch with or our fellow church members, fellow islanders, fellow Americans or even all Christians. Our neighbor is anyone, absolutely anyone we encounter who is in need.

Jesus chose a dying man to represent the whole wide world's need to love and be loved. What's interesting to me is that no matter how dire the circumstances – a man left for dead on a road in Jericho, a woman left for dead in the cold of winter in Seattle without food or shelter, a child left for dead in an immigration detention center - or how seemingly NOT dire our circumstances, no matter what our circumstances, that same need to give and receive love exists in each and every person on the planet and when we don't recognize that reality, the world comes undone, one person at a time. It's not just the man in the ditch in Jericho who is at risk of dying. We all die a little inside each time we have the opportunity to help, and don't do it. Some part of our loving tender hearts dies when we turn away. You see, we all need to love and to be loved. All of us. Every single one. We are all neighbors.

The parable of the Good Samaritan isn't a story of somebody who was perfect, or had all his ducks in a row, somebody with a front row seat in the kingdom of heaven because he did the right thing when nobody else did. The parable of the good Samaritan is one of the ways Jesus answered the question: *What must I do to inherit eternal life?* He didn't tell the story so we would learn that if we do good things we will go to heaven. He told the story so we would learn that all the way to heaven is heaven, and eternal life is life here and now, in the kingdom of heaven that comes near each time we recognize the reality that we are all neighbors, all beloved of God, and all in need of the kind of love that is active and changes, even saves lives

This doesn't mean we have to save the world, we don't. But if we use the excuse that there is too much need, too much suffering, too much heartache and anyway what can one person do about that... well, nothing will change. The reality that we are all neighbors doesn't mean we need to try to fix the whole world. It does mean we must see everyone we encounter as beloved. It means we must help wherever we can. Because if Jesus is to be believed, what's needed for eternal life is to be about the business of building God's kingdom here and now by acting justly, mercifully and lovingly with everyone we encounter.

We have everything we need to do our part in loving the world back into wholeness. We were equipped for that work in the world when we were baptized. In a few minutes, we will baptize Liam and Walter, who will become the newest sweet saints on the planet. We have the wonderful opportunity to help them grow up in a world that is permeated with God's love. Listen carefully. Answer truthfully. Let yourself be changed by this wonderful thing God is doing right here, in this place. And know yourselves to be the beloveds God sends out into the world to make a place of justice and mercy and peace and love that these precious little boys can grow into and live into and maybe even learn from us how to find their own place in ushering in the beautiful kingdom. Amen.