

**5 Pentecost
July 14, 2019**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

The parable of the Good Samaritan. We all know the story. We know the main character so well, we've named hospitals, nursing homes, relief agencies, and philanthropic organizations after him. The Wildflower Medical and Dental Clinic on Herbert Street in West Augustine had its beginnings in the building right behind St. Cyprian's ... what is now the Church Office ... and the official name of Wildflower is the Good Samaritan Health Clinic.

Jesus tells this as a parable. A man on a journey is robbed and left for dead ... a priest and a Levite pass him by ... yet a Samaritan stops and helps. The Samaritan, showing mercy, exemplifies what it means to be a neighbor. So the lesson of this parable must be, "Be like the Samaritan. Be a nice person. Go and do what he did."

So, starting the Good Samaritan/Wildflower Clinic was being a neighbor to those in the area who could not afford medical and dental care. Jesus would be proud ... don't you think?

To assist others, to show concern, and to offer compassionate care to those in need or trouble. The Good Samaritan offers us a beautiful example to follow, and we would do well to pay attention. But, is that all that this parable is about? Is there more to it than meets the eye on first reading?

Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote about the intersection of religion and politics. He borrowed a phrase from a newspaper editor to say that the purpose of religion was to "comfort the afflicted, and to afflict the comfortable."

What if Jesus's parable is more than a good-example-to-follow story? What if it's a reversal story? A story intended to upset our categories of good and bad ... sacred and profane ... benefactor and recipient? If we too easily and comfortably identify with the Good Samaritan in this parable, I believe we are missing the point. Maybe the whole point of the Samaritan is that the Samaritan is not like us ... he is different in ways that make us uncomfortable.

Here's a possibility ... what if the story changes, depending on where we locate ourselves within it ... with whom we choose to identify? If you're like me, you probably identify yourself in the priest and the Levite on your bad days, and in the Good Samaritan on your good days. Sometimes we see a need and we pass it by because we're too busy, preoccupied, afraid, overwhelmed, or tired. However, sometimes, we follow the Good Samaritan's example beautifully, and reach out to those in need ... no matter what the cost.

By the time Jesus told this story in first century Palestine, the hostility between the Jews and the Samaritans was ancient, entrenched, and bitter. I talked about this in my sermon a couple of weeks ago. The Jews and the Samaritans disagreed about everything that mattered ... how to honor God ... how to interpret the Scriptures ... and how and where to worship. Jews and Samaritans practiced their faith in separate temples, read different versions of the Torah, and avoided social contact with each other whenever possible. The fact is the two groups hated each other. We're inclined to praise the Good Samaritan. However, the mere fact that we use the adjective "good" when referring to the Samaritan ... in-and-of-itself ... is an insult to every Samaritan ... it assumes that they are all "bad." Jesus's choice to make him ... of all people ... the hero of the story, was nothing less than scandalous to his original listeners' ears. It afflicted the comfortable who had the notion that it was okay to harbor these feelings of animosity towards all Samaritans.

To put this in more contemporary language, the Samaritan is the "Other" ... other race ... other gender ... other sexual orientation ... other ethnic heritage ... other nationality. In today's headlines and politics the Samaritan is the refugee immigrant alien ... so it is acceptable to call him "illegal." He is the object of fear, condescension, disgust, and judgment.

Is there anything we can do in our 21st century lives to recover the scandal at the heart of this parable? Think about it this way ... who is the last person on earth you'd ever want to consider "the good guy?" The last person you would ever want to ask for a favor ... much less owe your life to? Whom do you secretly hope to convert, fix, impress, control, or save ... but never, ever show your vulnerability to ... to show them your desperate need?

Consider some possibilities ... A progressive Democrat is robbed, and a far-right Tea Party Republican saves her life. A racist white cop is being beaten by a mob ... and an African-American teenager jumps in to protect him. A transgender woman is assaulted ... and an anti-LGBTQ activist saves her life. An outspoken atheist ridiculed, and a Bible-thumping fundamentalist defends him. A border patrol agent is attacked ... and an undocumented refugee immigrant risks everything to save the agent's life.

I don't mean for a moment to trivialize the real and consequential differences that divide us politically, religiously, racially, or ideologically in today's world. I dare not do that ... not when those differences are costing people their lives. The reality of Matthew Shepherd losing his life because of being gay ... or the all-too-many young black men who have been shot by white police officers ... or the racist events in Charlottesville ... all tell us that the disputes we face today can have significant life-and-death outcomes. The antipathy between the Jews and the Samaritans in Jesus's day was not theoretical ... it was embodied and real. The differences between the Jews and Samaritans were not easily negotiated ... each was fully convinced that they were "right," and the other was "wrong."

So, what Jesus did when he deemed the Samaritan "good" was radical and risky. It stunned his Jewish listeners. He was asking them to dream of a different kind of kingdom. He was inviting them to consider the possibility that a person might add up to more than the sum of her

political, racial, cultural, and economic identities. He was calling them to put aside the history they knew, and the prejudices they nursed, the animosity they held. He was asking his listeners ... including us ... to leave room for divine and world-altering surprises.

What does it mean to be afflicted by this story? It means locating ourselves, not in the priest, the Levite, or the Samaritan, but in the wounded man ... the one dying on the road. Notice that he is the only character in the story not defined by profession, social class, or religious belief. He has no identity at all except his naked need. Maybe we have to occupy his place in the story first ... maybe we have to become the broken one, grateful to anyone at all who will show us mercy ... before we can feel the unbounded compassion of the Good Samaritan. Why? Because all tribalisms fall away in our desperate needs. All divisions of "us" and "them" disappear out of necessity. When you are lying bloody in a ditch, what matters is not whose help you'd prefer ... or whose faith expression you like best ... or whose politics you agree with. What matters is whether or not anyone at all will stop to show you mercy before you die.

If it hasn't happened yet ... your encounter with that which beats you to an inch of death ... it will. Somehow, someday, somewhere, you will be lying in that ditch. Maybe it will be in a hospital room. Maybe when you have been robbed of that which is most valuable to you ... a husband, wife, sister or brother, son or daughter. Maybe it was when a marriage failed and all your hopes and dreams vanished. It could have been after the last storm ... or a betrayal by someone you deeply trusted ... or maybe it was a dreaded diagnosis. Somehow, someday, somewhere it will happen to us all, if it has not already happened. In every single one of our lives, it will happen.

When it does, it won't be your theology that saves you. It won't be your politics that comes to the rescue. It won't be your cherished attachments that count. All that will matter is how quickly you swallow your pride and grab hold of that hand you hoped never to touch. All that will matter is how readily you will agree to receive help from the nemesis you fear. All that will matter is how long you'll persist in your fantasy before you allow the unsavory "Other" to bless you.

"Who is my neighbor?" the lawyer asked Jesus. Your neighbor is the one who scandalizes you with compassion, Jesus answered. Your neighbor is the one who upends all your entrenched categories and shocks you with a fresh face of God. Your neighbor is the one who mercifully steps over the ancient, bloodied line separating "us" from "them," and teaches you the real meaning of "Good." "Go and do likewise."

Amen.