

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost C 10 July 2022

Deuteronomy 30:9-14 / Psalm 25:1-10 / Colossians 1:1-14 / Luke 10:25-37

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Today's gospel reading is a little like seeing an old friend who hasn't been around for a while; we know it's been too long, but hey, we know this person pretty well, there are these steady, no surprises, people in our lives. That's how the parable of the Good Samaritan Jesus tells this morning is for many of us, a known quantity.

This trusty friend the Good Samaritan story is presented in our readings today along with several others that come together with similar themes – what it means to be a neighbor, how God calls us to behave, and who exactly are the neighbors helping whom in the story?

Just to add some background to Jesus' story, we know the cast of characters are Jews and Samaritans. It's kind of interesting: although there was a lot of tension between Jews and Samaritans in Jesus' time, Samaritans weren't really considered non-Jews. They were *not* Gentiles. Just a few weeks ago, in our gospel reading Saint Luke talked of a Samaritan village where the people refused to even receive Christ among them (the village that several of the disciples then suggested destroying with heavenly fire, and Jesus said "No!").

Biblical scholar Jeannine Brown explains that Luke doesn't identify Samaritans as a separate ethnic category from Jews; instead, they were considered part of wider Israel as it was conceived in the Hebrew Scriptures, the Christian Old Testament. Samaritans represent people on the edge of the people of Israel, the boundaries. But by the time of the Book of Acts they are an integral part of the people of God, and when Jesus includes a Samaritan in today's story he's indicating that God's restoration of all Israel is underway.

So the Good Samaritan is a story with nuances, and the closer we look at it, the more nuances we may see.

The gospel reading begins with a lawyer's questions to Jesus. He asks, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus answers the question with a question, basically, what do *you* think you have to do? What does the law say? Sure enough, the lawyer answers, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might; and your neighbor as yourself." Jesus agrees that is the answer, and by doing this the lawyer shall live. Live, as in the here and now. Jesus doesn't say "you'll inherit eternal life" or "join me in heaven." "Do this and you will live" puts the law's instruction about kingdom life in the reign of God squarely in the present time. It's not something to try and earn or possess, but something to be lived, acted out, in the here and now.

To live in the kingdom of God is to see other people with compassion, to see everyone as members of God's family. It means seeing others in terms of how we're all joined together by our need, our shared dependence on God's grace, and on each other.

Jesus has a final twist on the story of the Good Samaritan that changes our perception of who the guy in the ditch is. The parable is told when the lawyer asks, "Who is my neighbor?" in a way that suggests he's looking for a way to narrow the scope of how to define "neighbor."

Jesus does the opposite. He shows us we need to define "neighbor" not by how near they are to us (the people living next door, maybe) or how much like us they are (somebody *a lot* like us), but rather that our neighbor is the person who's in need. That's what defines them.

The needs of another person go above all other considerations.

But that's not the only meaning of the story. Jesus asks, "Which of these three was a *neighbor* to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The lawyer answers, "The one who showed him mercy."

So it's not just the person in need who's our neighbor, but also the person responding to our need – especially if it's not someone we expected or even wanted to respond. That's what happens when the Samaritan – the other - is recognizable as our neighbor. Would the

lawyer have accepted help from a Samaritan, someone he'd been raised to despise? Would we have? Could we have accepted that help?

Jesus' twist on the story suggests he may be telling it for another reason. We assume at first that the story of the Good Samaritan is about us helping others. Then suddenly it's about us being helped by others, creating a story of greater mutuality than perhaps we realized.

Jesus invites us to identify with each other in terms of our vulnerability and shared human need, rather than identifying with external distinctions. Whether we're the people giving help or receiving help, whether we're in a position of need or abundance, we humans are bound together in our vulnerability. What matters is our humanity, not which tribe, or group, or party we belong to. Those distinctions may matter to us, but they don't affect our status as children of God who are all kindred with each other.

This take on the story of the Good Samaritan offers us a different picture of God. Jesus is bearing witness to a God defined by concern for how we treat each other and help each other, that we live together caring for each other in the here and now. Not a God who's defined mostly by power or strength or a need to be praised.

Jesus' God is less a ruler than a parent, less an enforcer of rules than one who desires all good things for God's children. Perhaps Jesus' whole ministry, including his crucifixion,

was to demonstrate God's great love for us and burning desire that we might similarly love one another.

Once we know eternal life is ours for free, that it isn't something to earn, we can recognize God's compassion for us. Perhaps we may even recognize the person in the ditch, the stranger from nowhere, as our Lord. Maybe this parable could use a new name: how about "The Neighbor" or "Christ in the Ditch?"

When we love the Lord our God with all our heart, all our soul, and all our mind, we reflect God's mercy when we respond to our neighbor. We see the oil of our baptism and the wine of Holy Communion used as the Samaritan tends to the wounded stranger. And Jesus tells us, "Go and do likewise." That "gospel that has come to you," as Saint Paul calls it, bearing fruit in every good work, comes to us today at the font, the table, and from the pulpit. As the Hebrew Scripture says in our first reading, it is very near to us.

One of Martin Luther's great works was translating the Bible from Latin into German, so that ordinary people could read it. It's told that when he was working on translating this parable, there were two German words we would translate as "neighbor" that he could choose from. One word meant "the person next door." The other one meant "the person in need." Luther chose the second one.

God invites us to find our unity in our shared human need. And when we do, we not only behave as neighbors, but we discover neighbors are all around us. And *we* are loving God with all our heart.

Amen.