

Sermons at St. Luke's

A sermon preached by the Rev. Jan Lamb on Sunday, July 11, 2010.

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, July 11, 2010 Luke 10:25-37

I told you I'd be back! For me, it's been 6 very short months since I told you good-bye, packed 2 huge suitcases, and headed off to San Pedro, Belize and Holy Cross Anglican School. I missed you, and I sincerely want to thank you for all the many ways you supported me while I was there – your prayers, cards, letters, emails, your generosity when I notified you of a special need at Holy Cross. I always felt that you were there with me. Thank you.

I have said here before that I am quite fascinated by the way our lectionary works, how the lessons are put together and how a certain reading comes along at just the right time. Today's Gospel is one of the most familiar stories in the Bible. People who have never been to church or who have never read the Bible, know of the Good Samaritan. Where did this story of the helpful man who rescued a stranger come from? It came from a lawyer's challenging question to Jesus, the question "And who is my neighbor?" Everyone knows who their neighbors are—or at least until Jesus comes along and turns it all upside down.

In the past 8 or so months, I have had countless new neighbors. First, last November, I moved from my condo to an apartment here in Durham. There are 185 other apartments in this complex – lots of neighbors – but I have not met any of them. In fact, I have only seen a handful. I hear the footsteps of some of them as they go up the steps to their 2nd and 3rd floor apartments. I see their cars in the parking lot, maybe catch a glimpse of someone walking a dog, picking up their mail or taking a swim. Every morning, the parking lot empties early as everyone goes off to work or school. And who is my neighbor?

In San Pedro, I lived in an apartment within a small complex. I was the longest-term resident there this year. Some folks came for a night or two as part of their vacation; others stayed several weeks or a few months. I got to know many of them. We'd gather on someone's porch in the evening or at the pool, exchange stories of where we were from, why we were in Belize, how many times we had come in the past. When I would come in from school in the afternoons, someone always asked about my day, about the children. A few even came and volunteered at Holy Cross during their stay. Then they went home to Minnesota, Canada, Ohio, Wisconsin, Texas and their jobs and families. And who is my neighbor?

At Holy Cross School, I was surrounded by 500 precious and beautiful children. They greeted me each morning with big smiles and "Good marning, Deacon Jan". I was warmly welcomed and accepted by the dedicated teachers and administrators. As I got to know the children and their families, I shared their joys – a lost tooth, new shoes, the completion of a class project, passing a hard test, welcoming a new baby --- and I also shared the heartache of abuse, neglect, hunger, death and fear. I learned a great deal about myself, about taking risks, about following God's plan and about who my neighbor is.

Let's look again at the story that Luke tells of Jesus, the lawyer and the man who has come to be called the Good Samaritan: Many have implied that the lawyer, the priest and the Levite are bad because the Samaritan is called good. Let's take a look at each of them in the story.

“Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus knew this was a man who had dedicated his life to the study and following of the law, so he asks him “What is written in the law?” 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 says, “You have answered rightly; do this and you shall live.”

The lawyer most likely thought to himself, “Yes! I aced that one.” But being a lawyer, and as the Gospel says, “wanting to justify himself”, the lawyer asked another question – simple but loaded, only five words, “and who is my neighbor?” Who is it that I’m supposed to love as I love myself? Let’s see how this upstart teacher Jesus answers that question. Jesus had a teaching moment laid at his feet. Rather than give a detailed answer, Jesus told a story.

The setting of the story was the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, not a long way, about 18 miles but as you may know, it was a desolate, lonely, narrow, dangerous road, frequented by bandits. So, while a logical place for Jesus to set the story, one might wonder why the man traveled alone. That is a topic for someone else’s sermon.

This traveler had been robbed, beaten and left for dead. The first person to come along is a priest, and he doesn’t just keep walking, he steps to the other side of the road. The implication is that the priest is insensitive, callous, even rude. Aren’t priests supposed to be helpful and caring? Yes, but, in those days, a priest’s duty was to minister to the people, offering sacrifices in the temple. According to Hebrew law, one of those things that would have prevented a priest from doing his job, was to come within thirty steps of the dead. Doing so or touching a dead body would render a priest ritually unclean. This priest might have thought, “This is only one man. I have a whole town full of people who are depending on me. I can’t neglect them.” This priest apparently would not take the risk that would hamper his work. Chances are, everyone listening to Jesus’ story agreed with the motivation of the priest. Jesus implied that under the law, the priest made a good decision, and yet, there was a better one that he could have made. Jesus raises the possibility that although the priest would be legally unclean, still there are other things that need to be taken into account, such as compassion. So, what we have here is a good man following the rules, until Jesus comes along and says there may be other ways to measure his life.

Sometimes we act in ways that aren’t compassionate in order to do things we believe we have to do. In the course of “just doing our job” people can be sacrificed. How often have you heard someone say, that’s just the nature of war, or that’s the way it is in business? Or, that’s life. Jesus is saying there is another way. Jesus is saying to be compassionate often doesn’t make economic or life sense. Love doesn’t make sense.

Next came the Levite who also passed on the other side. The Levite knew that the priest had gone on before him, maybe he was even still within sight. The Levite assessed the situation by thinking, “That priest was just ahead of me, and he didn’t stop to help that man. The priest is the priest. He certainly knows more than I do. So, I don’t think I should stop either.” Does this sound familiar? The Levite chose to follow someone else’s judgment. Jesus challenged his actions as well. If as Christians we continue to use this excuse, then we’ll continue to have poverty, racism, wars, economic injustice; we’ll continue to look the other way, to defer to others, to pass over to the other side.

If we were making up this story today, who would we cast as the “good guy”? Would it be a fine member of the St. Luke’s family? Or maybe in modesty, we’d create a fictional character from a nearby imaginary parish. Wouldn’t we want it to be someone like us who comes to the rescue? It would surely make us feel good about ourselves and our attempts at doing God’s work. Would it ever be someone considered an enemy? Would the hero of our story be a member of the Taliban, an undocumented immigrant, or a drug dealer? Only Jesus, who dined with tax collectors, talked to women and criminals, chose the company of sinners, lepers, the poor and the outcasts, only Jesus would tell a story where a Samaritan is the one who stops to help. Remember, for over 8 centuries, there had been hostility and hatred between the Samaritans and the Jews. Like all Samaritans, the traveler in this parable himself was an outcast, cut off from society, unclean. He could touch the wounded man, and it wouldn’t make a difference to law or morality. Yet, he took a risk. He risked being rejected by his “enemy.” The afflicted man could have said, “Yes, I know I may be half-dead, you’re probably my last hope, but you’re a Samaritan. Don’t touch me!” Jesus shows that both men were willing to take risks—the Samaritan through offering to assist the afflicted person, and the man lying by the side of the road through accepting the Samaritan’s compassion. The Samaritan knew that the desire to live and love crossed all cultural lines. One person can make a difference. Being Christ-like is risky business, and we are called to take risks.

How do we step out of our comfort zones and take risks? Can we become Good Samaritans, better neighbors? Can we really seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves? It’s not easy. Over the last several months, God has led me down many new paths, stretching me in ways I didn’t think I could go, forcing upon me neighbors I would not necessarily have chosen on my own. But the good news of the Gospel is that we don’t have to be afraid to get involved. We don’t have to save all the people in the ditches by ourselves. God gives us the tools by which to reach out beyond our “safe” neighbors. When we unite to do this work together, the job becomes easier. One of the things that drew me – and I think many of you -- to St. Luke’s years ago was the emphasis this parish puts on outreach. We commit our time, talents and resources to making the way a little smoother and the world a little better for our neighbors. No, we can’t do it all; we can’t fix everything that’s wrong in our world or even our neighborhood; we can’t feed every hungry child or house every homeless person. But, we can over time make a difference. My friend Francis Wilson, founder of Holy Cross school, loves to quote a poem she learned in elementary school. It goes like this:

**Little drops of water,
little grains of sand,
make the mighty ocean
and the beauteous land.**

Holy Cross School is a place of miracles. Because of the little drops of water in the form of loving volunteer hands and strong backs, there is solid ground, classrooms, fresh paint, new bathrooms. Because of the little grains of sand that become generous donations, there are uniforms, a feeding program, support staff, school supplies. Because of people who believe education is the key to the future, 26 graduates in the class of 2010 will attend high school on fully paid scholarships.

We, like the Samaritan, have made the decision to stop and bind the wounds of others but also like the Samaritan, to offer our resources over time to continue that care. He not only left a little money to take care of the immediate needs, but he also promised that when that ran out, he would come back and pay more. God loves people who get serious about giving help over a long time, about making a stand, about joining up, about working along with others to create a more compassionate world.

So like the Samaritan, embrace a need you can ease in a moment. But then let's do more. I encourage you to commit to compassion up front: give your presence, and the wherewithal to continue the work, and promise to provide more not if, but when, it's needed. When we send mission teams to Belize and other places year after year, when we have an on-going collection of food items for the Urban Ministries food bank, when we hold Vacation Bible school summer after summer, when we help host homeless families in the IHN network several times a year, when our parish commits over \$14,000 to numerous local and international service agencies, we are committing to the long term.

As I prepared this sermon, I wanted to tell you stories of the work I did at Holy Cross, stories of some of the children, some of the encounters I had with them and their families. I thought I could tell you how I ministered, and rescued and taught and loved children who needed all those things. How I had been God's hands and feet in a place unknown to much of the world, ignored by those who live nearby. I wanted to tell you about my great mission trip, but every time I started a story, I realized that the true beneficiary in each case had been me. I was the one who was shown the face of Christ in unlikely places each day. I was the one who was ministered to and loved. I was the one who encountered amazing generosity. I was the one whose life has been changed and so richly blessed. So I guess my take-away from all this talk about good Samaritans is this: We are called to follow Jesus and to do the things he charged us to do. We as Christians are called to live differently, to think differently, to love differently. We are called to be neighbors to those who we wouldn't necessarily choose as neighbors. In most cases, we will never know the ways their lives might have been affected. Two quick stories – On my last day at Holy Cross, one of the ladies who works in the cafeteria pulled me into the kitchen. She has come to work at the school this year so I haven't known her as long as I have some of the others. Her husband has been a part of the construction crew for a couple of years, and their children attend the school. My main encounters with her were when I got my lunch each day, she would find a big glass and fill it with ice and a cold drink for me. In the kitchen that last day, she pressed into my hand this wooden necklace and in her limited English said, "Thank you for all you have done for my family." I don't really know what I did for them, but I'm glad they are my neighbors. And at our last weekly chapel service, I told the children good-bye and how much I had loved being at Holy Cross and especially with them in chapel. As they filed out going back to their classrooms, one little boy threw his arms around my waist and said "I am going to miss you so much." Honestly, I didn't know his name or what class he was in. I don't think I had ever seen him or had a conversation with him, but we were neighbors.

By going to Holy Cross, becoming deeply involved in the day-to-day workings of the school and its children, I took many risks. I risked letting them care for me and in turn I was able to care for others. Jesus challenges us today in this gospel. Jesus wants us to go beyond the law and what's traditionally acceptable. Jesus wants us to take risks. Jesus wants us to take care of our neighbors. "And who is my neighbor?" The one who showed mercy. "Go and do likewise."