

Proper 10C (Pentecost 7), 2010

Text: Luke 10:25-37

Title: The Good Samaritan

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Today's gospel lesson seems quite simple and straight-forward. It's the story of the Good Samaritan, and we all know what the moral is: Help people in need, no matter who they are. When you hear "Good Samaritan" that's probably what you think of. Someone has a flat tire, and someone else stops to help. A little old lady has her purse stolen, and a nice young man runs down the block to catch the thief.

We think of Good Samaritans as nice, strapping young men, Boy Scout types, who are eager to help and refuse any reward. They are strong, handy with tools, and always show up in the nick of time.

But today's story is more dramatic than changing a tire or chasing down a purse-snatcher. The Samaritan does much more than just lend a hand to the man in need. He saves the man's life.

A modern version would go something like this. You head downtown this afternoon to enjoy a beautiful summer day. It's been awhile since you've seen the city, and you decide to take advantage of the weather. You find your way to Millennium Park and spend a relaxing afternoon there.

On the way home you start off on the Stevenson, but after a few miles traffic grinds to a halt. No one is moving. In the distance you think you can see flashing lights. There must be an accident. After nearly half an hour of sitting, you decide to get off the interstate and work your way home on the surface streets.

You start heading south and before you know it, you're in Englewood. It's a hot evening, and there are lots of people on the street, milling about. At a stop light you notice a commotion among a group of young African-American men. Suddenly, you hear a series of loud pops and everyone starts running in different directions. As the crowd clears, you see one man lying on the ground, bleeding heavily from wounds in his chest.

What do you do? You're tempted to just go on your way home, just pretend you didn't see anything and keep driving. It's none of your business, you think. You figure he was probably a gang banger anyways, and you don't want to get caught in the middle of anything.

Do you keep driving, or do you stop to help? Well, you decide to risk it. You pull over, take off your shirt and use it to bind up the wounds and stop the bleeding. When the ambulance doesn't show up right away, you help the man into your car and drive him to hospital. When you get there, it's obvious he's not going to be able to pay, so you leave your credit card and offer to pay the man's hospital bill in full. And then you come back and visit him, and keep checking up on him until he's completely healed.

I can't speak for you, but I know that I would be more likely to just keep driving. I might call 911 to make sure that emergency crews get there. But it's hard to imagine personally caring for this man in the way that the Samaritan did.

And while this story is hypothetical, there are far too many real life examples of people in need. When you look around you, you can easily be overwhelmed by the sheer number of people in need. So who do you help? And who do you ignore?

Do you help the members of your family who are out of work? Do you help people here in our community who are in need? Do you give priority to those in the greater Chicagoland area? Or fellow Americans? Do you send money overseas to places like Haiti and China and South Africa and Romania? Do you give to Lutheran World Relief or to the Lutheran Hour or to Worship for Shut-ins? Do you contribute to the Red Cross or the Salvation Army or the Lions Club or to Amnesty International or to the March of Dimes? With all these people in need, who do you help?

And do you feel guilty when you say "No" to people in need? When you ignore the infomercials and the junk mail and the phone calls and the personal appeals when people ask for money?

So what do you do? How do you decide who to help?

If we read the story of the Good Samaritan this way, that it's only about helping other people, we're going to end up in despair. The point is that we can never help everyone in need. We will always fall short in our giving and our mercy.

But let's step back a moment, and consider not only the story, but also the context in which Jesus tells it. Why does Jesus tell this story?

It starts out with a lawyer. This would not be a secular lawyer like we know today, but an expert in God's Law, a religious scholar.

The lawyer has a question for Jesus. It seems simple: How are you saved? How do I get eternal life?

Notice why he asked this question. He isn't asking questions out of curiosity. He's trying to test Jesus and see how he does. He already knows the answer. So Jesus turns the question back on him. "How do you read the Law?"

Eager to impress, the scholar gives the perfect text-book answer, "Love God and love your neighbor."

Excellent, A+, go to the head of the class.

But the lawyer isn't satisfied. He has a follow-up question. "Who is my neighbor?" Again, Luke tells us what is really going on. He tells us that the lawyer is asking this question to justify himself.

Let's go back the original question. "What shall do..." The lawyer assumes that his salvation depends on his actions. He thinks that there's something that he can do to earn his inheritance.

When the answer is given to "love your neighbor", the lawyer wants to know who he has to love. Certainly you can't love everyone. Certainly you can't be a neighbor to everyone. So the lawyer looks for a loophole. If you only have to love certain people, then he's good.

The lawyer expects Jesus to tell him that his neighbors are his friends and family, that his neighbors are the people who love him. At the very least, he expects Jesus to tell him that his neighbors are fellow Jews like himself.

We're good at loving people who love us. We're good at loving our families and friends people who look like us. We're not always good at loving people who look different or who come from other backgrounds, or those who are mean and nasty to us.

Thankfully our salvation is not based on our ability to love. We are not saved based on how loving we are to God or other people. If that were the case, we would be hopelessly lost. We can never justify ourselves.

So what do we do with this story? The key to any story that Jesus tells is finding where you fit into the story. If you only picture yourself as the one who finds the beaten man on the side of the road, then you'll be left feeling guilty for not doing more to help the people in your life.

There's another option.

Read the story again, but make yourself the first man, the man who was robbed. Consider reading it like this:

The story begins with a man heading in the wrong direction. He's going from Jerusalem to Jericho. He's going away from Jerusalem. Jerusalem is where the temple was, where the presence of God was. It was the holy city, the center of the universe.

To go from Jerusalem to Jericho was to go downhill, both spiritually and physically. Jerusalem was up, high, in the hills. Jericho is the lowest city on the face of the earth, at over 850 feet below sea level.

You, too, have left the holy city, the presence of God almighty and wandered downhill. Along the way, you have fell victim to the attacks of your enemies- sin, death and the devil. They have beaten you, robbed you, and left you for dead.

The priests and the Levites, the religion of the Old Testament, have been unable to help you, and have passed you by.

Your last hope comes in a stranger, an outsider. He has compassion on you. He binds your wounds. He helps you up. He pays for all your needs. He leaves you in good care, and He promises to come back for you.

That person is Jesus Christ. He is the Samaritan. He finds you in all your need and restores you to health.

Remember, Jesus is on His way to Jerusalem. And He will stop to care for you along the way.

That's where salvation comes from, not in loving, but in being loved. You cannot do anything to inherit eternal life. You cannot do anything to justify yourself. But Jesus has done it all for you.

So what do you do with the people in need in your life? You help them, of course. Not because you have to, not because your salvation depends on it, but because you too have been helped.

Every day the Lord puts neighbors into your life to love. That's one of the joys of the Christian life. When you wake up in the morning, you don't know who your neighbor will be. It could be your husband or wife, your kids or grandkids who need your love. It could be your friends or someone else in your community. But it could be someone you would least expect.

Show mercy and compassion to them, because the Lord has shown mercy and compassion to you.