

Sermon, 15 July 2007—Proper 10

Deuteronomy 30:9-14; Psalm 25; Colossians 1:14-26; Luke 10:25-37

For most of us, reflection on the story Jesus tells the self-justifying lawyer usually starts at the wrong place. Even the title we have given the story doesn't point to Jesus' point. It is not about a virtuous Samaritan, but about a man who was attacked on the way to Jericho and left for dead. This is one of the parables of Jesus that, rather than preserved as a means for personal transformation, has gotten shanghaied into instruction on behavior. The Church has done with this story what the lawyer did with the Law: distance it into good advice.

The danger, as always, is that we will stop there: we will become invested in our goodness, rather than in our surrender to God. We postpone doing what is right by debating what is right. Our concern becomes the lawyer's: we want to justify ourselves. We have wanted to know who the "good" person in the story is, so that we also can side with the good. We scan (and hiss) the passers-by—that cold-hearted Levite, that arrogant priest—and smile approvingly and wipe a tear away at the kind Samaritan, who we like to think did what we would do, of course. Just as the lawyer delayed his action, by quibbling about whom to designate as neighbor, so we defend ourselves against the story's uncanny power by turning it into a moralized fable or a sentimental picture to frame and hang in cross-stitch over the dining room table, just as we figured out how to frame and hang its teller, two thousand years ago and in our own day.

Parables are not teaching stories; they are precision tools for transformation. When we identify with characters in the story, we find ourselves caught, shaken, turned upside down, shocked into asking ourselves

if we are willing to face our fear or grief or rage, if we are ready to lower our defenses against life, if we are ready to live as the parable suggests. The person introduced first is the one we are meant to identify with. Jesus calls the lawyer's attention to a man going on a journey from Jerusalem to Jericho and foolishly traveling alone. This is the person whose adventures Jesus asks him to follow, and that means Jesus wants the lawyer to identify with him. Unless the lawyer cares about *that* man, he cannot care about how the story will turn out. On that notorious stretch of lonely highway, the man the lawyer identified with is set upon, beaten, plundered, and left for dead.

Why does Jesus ask the lawyer to identify with a victim of a mugging? So the lawyer will understand how to recognize a genuine need. Loving one's neighbor does not stop at interpretation of a code. It involves actual people, sometimes actual crises. This is not speculation about how to fulfill the Law, but diagnosis about what is required in real time. Jesus' first lesson to the lawyer is this one: what would you, if you were dying from exposure and blood-loss, need? You have asked about how to implement a ruling in the Law, but this is not about you and your ability to perform with impeccable precision as you execute exactly and efficiently the minimal legal requirement. This is about recognizing other human beings as your equals, not the utensils your self-interest, however moral you claim that your intentions are. People are not raw materials to be used in your portrayal of your worthy self-image, but body and soul and spirit, with hopes deep as yours, with loves as committed as yours, who strive and suffer as you one day might as well. If you were dying by the side of the road, who would *you* recognize as your neighbor?

But Jesus has again done a dangerous thing. He has asked the lawyer to consider himself as needy. Are we to see ourselves as wounded and

dying? Is *that* the person I am supposed to identify with, black and blue in the ditch? Is *that* how I am supposed to see myself in order to understand compassion? I hope you sense even now the shock of offense the lawyer must have felt. Think what a more pleasant story it would have been, told from the perspective of the Samaritan. “Here I am, on the way to Jericho. I’m certainly not going to Jerusalem, where I would not be welcome. Look! I am startled to find this poor wounded man, who has been attacked like I have heard others have been attacked here. You know, it just goes to show there are bad people out there. But I am not one of them. So, even though it interrupts my trip, I will do the right and generous thing.” That is a more satisfying story. I would much prefer to think of myself as a good-hearted and generous hero. “Yes, I am the one who can learn to be and to do good.”

Jesus knows that to ask the lawyer to identify with this virtuous interventionist would only inflate the lawyer’s grandiose self-image. Jesus sees clearly the insecurity and inadequacy beneath the vanity that wishes to justify itself. Is this man ready to see his anxiety about being right as only the sound of groans from the gutter? Jesus positions the lawyer to think of himself as needing to rely on the compassion of others, because, seeing him, Jesus knows him and that truly is where the lawyer is. It doesn’t quite feel as good, does it? “Yes, I am the one who needs help, who needs your patience and compassion.”

No, I don’t think we like to be located there quite as much. Let’s make this a story about a VERY Surprisingly Good Samaritan, whom we can then imitate. That is much more satisfying—self-satisfying, in fact.

But, you see, wounded and needy and unable to rescue himself is truly where the lawyer stands in the eyes of God—as do I, as do you. We all stand in the need of God’s mercy. Do I really think I can negotiate with God

an acceptable way of living out God's Law as a way of avoiding looking at my dereliction? Isn't that proof that what I have done to myself, in my heart of hearts, is encourage my sense of inadequacy to punch me numb and dump me at the side of the road, where I will die alone in the dirt without help? The wrong question is "how can I look good and do right?" The right question is "how can I get help?" Does anyone want to face this as their question? But isn't it vital to be reminded of that if it is the truth?

Let's continue to think this through now. If I am ready to admit that I am a figure that damaged, from where do I want my help to come? Well, I want to receive it from someone who will restore my façade of dignity, someone worthy of my badly effaced merit, a peer, an equal, someone who will not humiliate me further, but understand how urgently my class-bound pride requires me to deny my neediness, and who will help me pretend nothing is wrong. Well, who better for that than the clergy?

So Jesus gives the lawyer, not just one, but two, clerics. As usual, the clergy disappoint. They fail to read the man's mind. They fail to anticipate and meet his needs. They don't show up on time, and when they do show up, they don't seem to have the time. In fact, they pass by on the other side, rushing off at coffee hour to talk to someone else, just as we are screwing up our courage to hint that something might not be OK. Of course, in this story, the Levite and priest know that handling a corpse would render them unclean. They must maintain ritual purity for liturgical duties. Besides, the man lying there might be bait in a trap, as many situations of pastoral care could possibly be: no sooner do you stop to help than you are clubbed from behind. No, it is prudent to keep moving.

Jesus rubs salt into the wound. The one who stops to help renders the wounded man unclean: a contaminating Samaritan, a filthy half-breed no

better than a Gentile dog. But if you really are in need, are you going to insist on the discriminations of a social system that sets some up as insiders and others as outsiders? Do you prefer tribal purity to survival? The blood in the Samaritan's hands is just as red as your blood draining into the sand. Isn't this the moment to recognize a common humanity—which the Samaritan *does* recognize—rather than to quibble about how to preserve oneself faultless in the eyes of the Law? That's the question for the lawyer, isn't it? When you are faced with the life or death of your neighbor, is that the time to ask if you are keeping within the bounds of the Law?

So now, Jesus is ready to ask the final question: who proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among thieves? The lawyer's answer will have nothing to do with the public performance of self-justifying benevolence, but with his ability to identify in others the suffering he shares with them and to meet them as a fellow human being. We reach out to each other out of mutual need, all together trekking the dangerous Jericho-Jerusalem Road.

I need to say one more thing.

The conclusion of the conversation between Jesus and the lawyer is terse. We do not know if the lawyer's eyes are red with tears or if his lips are white with anger. I suspect he is biting his tongue enraged. He has not justified himself, as he hoped to, but has been shown the shallowness of his perspective and his essential needy insecurities. That is, I believe, this parable's final teaching: we cannot surrender to transformation in God's hands if we are unable to grasp and acknowledge our defensive anger.

Think again about this story. Do we only grow by suffering through what we want to avoid? Do we only learn by being confronted with what offends us? Is that any way to run a world? Does God never consult on smoother product performance? Isn't it time for a recall or an upgrade?

In other words, like so many parables, this story offends us, because it flushes out something we want to avoid. No wonder we twisted it into a teaching story. We can all agree that being helpful and nice to strangers is a good thing, because being needy in a broken world is NOT. This story, though, asks us to recognize ourselves as face down in a ditch.

Look at the levels of anger in this episode. The traveler attacked on the road to Jericho, if a faithful Jew, must at best be confused in his reaction to his rescue. Yes, he has been saved, but by someone who renders him unclean, someone he must dissociate himself from as soon as possible. How can he tell this story to anyone? Isn't it best for him to hide the fact that a Samaritan rescued him? Do you think he is not angry? But perhaps this experience of human love in action changed him forever.

The lawyer cornered by Jesus must at best also be confused in his reaction. Yes, his question has been answered, but by someone who saw his insecurity and exposed his self-righteousness and shallowness, asking him to identify either with someone dying or with someone unclean, and showing him that our common humanity has a far more compelling claim on us than the Law-abiding calibrations of virtue. The lawyer also will want to dissociate himself from this embarrassing exchange as soon as possible. How can he tell this story to his cronies in the bar as they decompress after a tough case? Isn't it best for him to hide the fact that a carpenter from Nazareth trumped him? Do you think he is not angry? But perhaps this experience of human wisdom in compassion changed him forever.

And we, if we have submitted to the telling, must also be confused in our reaction. What kind of a world is this, so full of suffering on the one hand, so demanding of us on the other? Why are we made so incomplete and so vulnerable? Why is life so hard? Do you think we are not angry with

God? And we must wait, clinging to what remains of our life, beaten and broken, until someone despised and rejected, a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief, bends down to draw us, as he draws all the world, to himself.

Let me warn you. Our anger at God is what we club into silence and toss by the side of the road. It is not good to know our resentment, we think, so we try to hide it from others, from God, even from our self. If you think this is not true for you, ask yourself if you are not impatient with strangers, frantic with schedules, sullen with companions, judgmental in situations that don't even require anything of you, passive in the currents of your future—all these are the bruises that mark the internal bleeding of suppressed rage. All these are the symptoms of the self-pummeling anger that you shove away from you and that you leave to die on its own. Of course, our piety causes us to want to pass by on the other side; God should not know how enraged we are with Him. Of course, it is our pity that causes us to want to pause, even at the messiness of our own suffering. We, the self-deceiving, are always the unclean; we are a mix of good and bad, and we are so anxious to be good, that do not know how to tell the truth about our selves.

But Christ dwells in us, who can lift us and take us to shelter and heal us, if we are willing to be seen as those who understand from personal experience, from grief and loss, that we can do nothing to salve our own wounds, but that compassion, shown even to our own anger, is how we recognize the despised but gentle hand of God, our Source, our Word, our Spirit, who lifts us up to heal us, so that we can praise the one God this day, as we hope to for all eternity.