**July 14, 2019 Fifth Sunday after Pentecost**

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**Peace Lutheran Church – Austin, Texas**

**GOSPEL Luke 10:25-37**

The holy gospel according to Saint Luke, the tenth chapter.

**Glory to you, O Lord.**

25Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” 26He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” 27He answered, “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.” 28And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”
  29But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” 30Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. 31Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. 32So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. 34He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. 35The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ 36Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” 37He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

The gospel of the Lord.

**Praise to you, O Christ.**

Who is my neighbor?

It’s a question posed to Jesus today with a clear ulterior motive…but a much less clear actual answer…

Who is my neighbor?

Those in the Missional River listening process have been asking this exact question for…about a year now. When we think about what it means to be connected to our neighborhood…to our broader community…who exactly are we talking about? Who is our neighbor? What is our neighborhood?

Do we pull up a map and draw a 5 mile radius around 10625 N FM 620 and call it a day?

Obviously, Jesus’ whole point in Luke 10 is that it doesn’t work like that…but I think we can actually swing the pendulum so far in the other direction that we still don’t get the point.

We can lull ourselves into a sense of comfort by assuring ourselves that we have the right answer by saying, “We get it Jesus. We are ALL neighbors! We’re ten steps ahead of that lawyer guy.”

And, of course that’s true. Jesus wants us to see that wherever we might want to draw a limit…set the radius the defines neighbor…he is going to keeping walking past that line without breaking stride…

But here’s the challenge in that. The idea that everyone is our neighbor isn’t enough to help us live our callings. To pat ourselves on the back for knowing that everyone is our neighbor is not the end of the parable’s journey…because at the end of the day…we’re simply *not* going to stop and help every person who needs help…We are going to be called into specific moments of neighbor care. That is where the rubber is going to meet the road in our disciple lives…in discerning when we are called to stop instead of passing by.

So, how does this parable help us better see and respond to the neighbors who walk the same roads we do? How does it help us know when and how to stop and truly be a neighbor?

To begin to answer that question, first I want us to imagine this man…walking down from Jerusalem to Jericho…Imagine his day…those moments that led up to that last horrible surprise before the world went blurry and throbbing…when he was beaten and robbed and left half-dead. What do you think he was doing? Did he have anyone to talk to that day? What might he have said? Do you think there was someone waiting for him? What might he have been doing in Jerusalem? Was Jericho his home or a stop on a longer journey?

How do you imagine this man?

Now…I want you to stop…and check in…have you been imagining someone kind and maybe a little lonely? What is this person like when he walks through you imagination?

Because what we know about him from the parable is…basically nothing. I think we probably imagine him as a sort of generic, good, everyday person…probably a little bit like us…

I wonder…how would your understanding of this story change if you found out this man who feel into the hands of robbers was a thief…or a criminal…or just a jerk who cuts people off in traffic and throws cigarette butts out the window? What if he was addicted? Or neglected his family? Or voted for the guy you hate?

Because one thing in this parable is very clear. Neighbor status is not earned. Not by being good…or the same as your neighbor…If we can’t imagine this parable still being true if the man who was robbed was a low-life (at least by our standards)…then I’m not sure we’ve yet heard the word of the Lord. Because…to the Samaritan, it’s pretty clear that that’s who he would have been. And he helped him anyway.

If only neighbor status were an application process…right? If you had to earn that status…no one would ever have neighbors who played awful music too loud…or had ugly lawn decorations…or mean dogs…

But neighbor status does not come from being good or sharing standards or morals or any of it.

One thing that *does* seem to be connected to having neighbor status is that being a neighbor means setting aside your routine to put caring for your neighbor first. And that is hard to do. Truly it is.

I sympathize with the priest and Levite. I can imagine their inner monologues. “I can’t stop… If I touch that bloody man I’ll be ritually unclean. I’ll miss work. It’s important that I remain ready to do the work of tending to worship. I just can’t. Not today.” I say those kinds of things to myself… “I can’t give money to every single person by the side of the road. I can’t go to every meeting. I can’t take in every abandoned pet (though my family would love to try). I can’t…”

It can be hard to believe that there is something we can do in the face of destruction and pain. It can be hard to believe we can be the ones to help. Right? It’s not necessarily just selfishness…It’s also that we don’t always believe we can really be the ones God is sending. We don’t believe in our own callings that much sometimes.

I don’t know about you…but I can tell you that every moment in my life where I feel like I might have gotten close to living like that Samaritan did…something thrust me past the boundaries of my own self doubt to help me believe I was the one to stop along the road.

This week I got to hear stories from two women I admire deeply…who were anchors of the movement to seek justice for Sandra Bland who died exactly four years ago this weekend. In my mind they are giants. They are heros. They are braver and stronger than I have ever been and will ever be. Yet both of them speak about their experience of being called to stop what they were doing…and go to the side of the road in Waller County…and they describe being drawn to that place beyond their own ability to act. Something beyond them made them brave.

If that is what it was like for them…maybe the fact that we aren’t natural born heroes isn’t a good excuse. We *all* need to let the Spirit pull us beyond what we’ve planned or believe we can do.

Maybe you are feeling called to roadside today…but aren’t sure you can do it. Maybe you want to support migrants being imprisoned along our nation’s border…maybe you want to reach out to those who are being impacted yet again by extreme weather on the coast…maybe you want to not just drive past the corner or under the bridge without caring about the stories of our siblings who are gathered there.

It is hard to find the courage to stop…to risk…to go beyond what you know or have planned or believe you can do.

At ranch camp last week, our youth took on a high ropes course challenge. It was 30 feet in the air and was terrifying even from the ground. One of the adult leaders who was encouraging the youth offered this guidance to the youth who were afraid. When they said, “I can’t.” He would say... “Instead of saying ‘I can’t’…maybe you can say, ‘I can try’ and ‘I can ask for help.’”

I wonder how this parable might have gone differently if the priest of Levite replaced, “I can’t” with “I can try,” or even, “I can ask for help.”

You see none of us is going to save the whole world single-handed. That job has already been taken and accomplished. Thank God. But we *are* called into brave and saving work.

There is a Jewish teaching that in Hebrew is called *tikkun olam* which means “to heal the world.” The teaching is this: the world is broken…shattered and suffering…we only have to live our lives to know that this is true. And the teaching says that each of us is called to reach out to the broken pieces of the world that we can touch…and try to mend them. What is put within our reach is given to us…and together…if we pick up the pieces, God empowers us to be healers of the world.

So, the question “who is my neighbor” has the easy answer “everyone.” And yet…when we ask: who is the neighbor along the road that I can stop and help today? Things come into sharper focus.

This is a question we get to ask as a community, too. And I have to tell you, I believe that we are being called to stop along the road and reach out in love in big and amazing ways. We will listen for these callings together. They will be scary sometimes…as scary as being suspended 30 feet above the ground…and then some. But maybe we can learn to take the words “I can’t” out of our mouths and to see what it feels like to say “I can try,” and “I can ask for help.” And step by step we might find ourselves in brave places we never could have imagined with neighbors whose presence offers us at least as much healing as we could ever offer them.

May God lead us forth and make it so. Thanks be to God. Amen.