

Towardness
5th Sunday after Pentecost
The Reverend Andrew Fiser
Greenland Hills UMC

Luke 10: 25-37 (New Revised Standard Version)

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He 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." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus 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. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He 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. The 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.' Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

Movement One:

I was going to start off with a lawyer joke, but I'm married to a lawyer. So, on advice of counsel, I'll remain silent on that.

As far as stories from the Bible go, what we typically call The Good Samaritan may be one of the most well-known. It has some great advantages for preaching. It's a pretty non-controversial passage if you don't poke around too much, so most preachers feel comfortable that no one's going to have a fit about the sermon this Sunday. And because it's well known, people have some familiarity with it, so you're not working with all new material. And, it's got some characters that one can throw shade at and feel morally superior toward – which can feel really thrilling.

And who doesn't want known as a Good Samaritan?

If someone is in need, it's the neighborly thing to do to stop and help. Go out of one's way to assist those who are in trouble. I'm not sure we even need Jesus to teach us this particular lesson.

There are Good Samaritan laws which offer legal protection to those who render aid to those they happen upon in life-threatening situations. Because we want more people to be able to act like the Good Samaritan.

The moral vision of helping one another in a time of need is one we need in our world. But there this story has bigger implications than be NICE to others.

Movement Two:

It's hard to tell if the legal expert who tests Jesus does so out of genuine curiosity or in an attempt to catch Jesus saying something controversial.

His question is about inheriting eternal life. And Jesus being Jesus, turns the question on the inquirer: "What does the law say?"

The lawyer rattles off the response which any Jew would know, a portion of the Shema Yisrael recited twice per day "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 joins that with the well-known imperative “to love your neighbor as yourself.”

Everyone knows this. Jesus affirms it. Do this, and you will live.

But the lawyer keeps poking the bear. “And WHO is my neighbor?” Who is the one close to me? Who is the one who is near to me? Who is the one who I am obligated to love?

Most interpreters hear in this question an attempt to limit one’s obligation to love, OR an attempt to get Jesus to repeat a theme that almost got him killed after his first sermon.

Earlier in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus reads the passage from Isaiah in his home synagogue, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has sent me to bring good news to the poor, release to the captive, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim a year of Jubilee when all debts are forgiven and a new economic order begins.”

Then, he says that this vision is being enacted right then and there. But he indicated that this vision turned into action extends way beyond the synagogue, way beyond those who share Jesus’ own Jewish identity. It’s for everybody.

And he recalls how God showed up in the prophet Elijah for the Sidonian widow during a famine and not the people of Israel. And he recalls how God showed up in Elijah’s protegee Elisha to heal a Syrian General of leprosy, and not Israelites.

And the crowd tries to throw Jesus off a cliff.

And here in this story, Jesus is it again. A man is beaten and left for dead by robbers along what was a very dangerous road from Jerusalem to Jericho. The parable should go, the priest or the Levite stop to help the man. They were obligated to help those in trouble like any good Jew. If the man was dead, they were obligated to bury the corpse. Touching a corpse might make them ritually impure. B

But as my Jewish New Testament Professor Amy-Jill Levine says, the choice is clear for any good Jew. When someone is in need on the side of the road, you help. There are rituals to purify one after touching a dead body. And yet, the priest and the Levite do the unthinkable, they ignore their religious obligation to help and avoid the man hurt on the side of the road. Now, the parable should continue with a third character, who should obviously be a good lay Jew who’ll stop and help. But, it’s not – it’s a Samaritan.

As Amy-Jill Levine says, Samaritans are “funny Jews.” They have different religious sites, importantly – not Jerusalem. But share many of the same religious facets as Jews. Yet, both had waged war on one another over these differences.

And so here is outsider, an Other, who not only got close to the injured man, but bandaged his wounds and paid for his care at an inn. It’s just outrageous that out of the three, the Samaritan would be the one to be the moral exemplar.

The real chef’s kiss of Jesus’ response to the lawyer, is when he asks at the end, “Which of these three was the neighbor to the man who got beat-up by robbers”. The lawyer is so mad or embarrassed he cannot bring himself to even say the word Samaritan. He can only say, “the one” who showed mercy.

To which Jesus simply responds, “GO and DO likewise.”

In Dr. King’s final sermon, the Mountain Top Sermon he told the crowd in Memphis that we continue to find ourselves on the Jericho Road. There continue to be bodies beaten and left for dead on the side of the road. There in Memphis, a United Methodist preacher named James Lawson was leading the Sanitation Worker’s Strike because the all-Black workforce was underpaid and worked in extremely dangerous conditions. One worker had been crushed to death by faulty machinery months before.

King said that the question should be not just, “what will happen to the man on the side of the road if I don’t help?” It’s also, “What will happen to me if I don’t stop and help?” And we, could, as David Lose suggests take it a step farther to ask, “What will happen to us as a community, as a world if I don’t stop to help?”

Movement Three:

Where this story gets controversial, is that it implies that if we want to follow Jesus, it means we'll likely need to risk something.

The point of the story is that a faith comes alive with "Towardness." We have to get close. There has to be some proximity to the vulnerable, to pain, to grief. We have to put our very selves on the line. Because, there may be robbers waiting in ambush, waiting for us to get near. It might be a trap. We may make the wrong move.

Listen, we I get that we are all of us trying to figure out how to live in a post-pandemic (fingers-crossed) world, after so much change has accelerated. The Republic is under threat from a fascism, with an attempted coup going unpunished.

The Supreme Court has been hijacked by Christian Fundamentalists who seek only raw power, expanding gun rights when we are plagued by mass shootings, eviscerating the separation between Church and state at the bedrock of our democracy, and endangering women's lives by overturning settled law of Roe v. Wade. All the while, homelessness is growing, Black and brown Americans are murdered by police sworn to protect them, and our economy works for the wealthiest 1%.

I don't mean to say that everything depends on just us. That's called co-dependence. It's like when corporations make us feel guilty about using straws, when they are the ones doing the vast majority of the polluting.

We cannot do it alone. We need community. And that community is called Church. A community established by Jesus so that all might have abundant life, especially those who've been beaten down and left for dead on the side of the road.

As mystic Howard Thurman said, "For this is why we were born: people, All people, belong to each other. The one who pushes the other away diminishes themselves. And the one who withdraws from the other destroys themselves."

Over these next 90 days, we'll be getting to know one another. But, in the midst of that we'll be listening and discerning. With your help in group listening sessions, surveys, and one-on-one meetings – we'll assemble a picture of who we are as a church in this moment. What do we do well? What are our strengths? We'll reflect on the challenges and opportunities in front of us. And we'll investigate our own neighborhood, both immediate and more broadly speaking.

And with prayerful listening with God and neighbors, we'll discover a vision for how we can have a faith that truly comes alive and makes an impact in the world. Of how we can live with towardness, compassionate concern for those left beaten up and left for dead by our world.

While there are many unknowns facing us, we can know this with certainty: The God who comes near to us in Jesus Christ meets us as we draw near to the pain and vulnerability of the world. And that takes guts.

May God give us the guts to be the Church driven by towardness.