

THE JERICHO ROAD

July 14, 2019

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First Presbyterian Church of Marion, Iowa
Text: Luke 10:25-37

SCRIPTURE

Luke 10:25-37

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."

The Word of the Lord... Thanks be to God!

SERMON

In August I have scheduled one final appointment with my knee surgeon. It will be a year since I had my second knee replacement, and so there will be one final x-ray and consultation. Things have been going very well. There is still a little stiffness, but certainly nothing at all like the pain that I had before. So I am assuming the surgeon will look over the x-rays, say everything looks good, shake my hand and say good-bye.

I am very glad to have that experience all behind me, and am extremely grateful to all of you for all your support and prayers as I went through it. Having surgery, the recovery, and then the follow up physical therapy, it all has a way of changing your perspective. You look at things a little differently. There are lessons that you learn, new insights into the way things are.

One of the insights that I became very aware of is that it can be a real pain to be in pain. You quickly become very grateful for modern pharmaceuticals because continual pain consumes all your attention. They tell you that it is important to stay ahead of your pain, and you certainly will regret it if you don't. Books, music, movies on Netflix, nothing can distract you. Little movements become monumental tasks. Time drags, even seems to stop. Nothing else matters other than you hurt.

I bring this up only to say that once you have experienced something like that you are never able to forget it. So what I want you to do this morning, I will admit is rather unpleasant. I want you to remember a time when you were in a lot of pain, but use your imagination a bit. I want you to imagine you are in a lot of pain, but not lying in a recliner with loved ones waiting on you hand and foot. No, you are in severe pain, but lying on the ground in a remote, deserted area. Furthermore, your injuries are from an attack. You have been a victim of unprovoked violence. Someone has beaten you, so you are bleeding with maybe a few broken bones. Your attackers have taken anything worthwhile down to your shoes, including your cell phone, and any form of

identification. So if you pass out and are unconscious, should someone find you, they would have no way of knowing who you are or how to contact your family. Can you imagine how you would feel? How desperate? How lost? How utterly hopeless?

It sounds like something out of a horror movie, doesn't it? Yet this is the scene that Jesus creates in our text for this morning. It is the lectionary passage for this Sunday, the very familiar story that we call "The Good Samaritan." You have probably heard many Sunday School lessons on this story. This is now the sixth time I have preached on it over the years I have been your pastor.

Since it is so familiar and I have preached on it in the past, I was strongly tempted to select another text, possibly some other lectionary reading, but I kept being drawn back to it. It was partly because I realized that this is a very nationalistic story. It had strong implications about what it meant to be an Israelite or Jew back in the time of Christ. So here we are, having just celebrated our national holiday of the 4th of July. Furthermore, over the next few months, as the Iowa Caucus approaches, we will be in a season of strong nationalism, and feelings of patriotism will run high. So with this, my next to the last sermon with you, perhaps it is appropriate for us to look at some lessons we can learn from this nationalistic story.

Because this parable is so very familiar we miss the clues of nationalism. It all starts when we are told that it was a lawyer, not a Pharisee or Sadducee, who was questioning Jesus. What the Bible calls lawyers were not experts in civil or criminal law. No, they were experts in the Torah, the Law of Moses. They were extremely patriotic, and believed that their national identity lay in obedience to what God had commanded through Moses. So when they thought Jesus was violating the Torah by healing on the Sabbath, it was more than doing something sinful. They regarded his actions as bordering on treason against Israel.

When Jesus asked the lawyer what he understood to be the answer of his own question, the lawyer responded quickly with the familiar words, "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." This passage he is quoting was very significant for all Israelites. It was a theological statement, something like our Apostles' Creed. But it was also a statement of national identity.

The best comparison I can think of would be if someone were asked: what does it mean to be an American? The answer might come back: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness..." The answer is more than just the words. The context, the history, the emotions that are evoked, they all play into understanding the answer given. So it was with the lawyer's response.

But there are other nationalistic clues in this text. A big one is the reference to a journey along the Jericho road between Jericho and Jerusalem. Both the names Jericho and Jerusalem stirred up nationalistic feelings among the Israelites. Jericho is the site of their first great victory of their conquest of the Promise Land. And Jerusalem was and is their capital and religious center. It might be like saying that someone was traveling between Valley Forge and Independence Hall in Philadelphia. Those are patriotic places for Americans.

But the major national emphasis comes from the way Jesus sets up the parable itself. You see at the time there was a strong anticlerical feeling directed against the priests and the Levites, especially out away from the capital city of Jerusalem. The priests and Levites represented an elitism of ceremonial pomp and aristocracy that alienated the common people. Hmm... Does that sound at all familiar? An elitism in the capital city that alienates the common people in rural areas? Anyway, at the time there were derogatory stories and jokes going around about priests and Levites. You know the kind of thing I mean... things like: "How many priests and Levites does it take to change a lightbulb?" (Biblical scholars are still trying to find the answer to that.) The hero of these jokes and stories was always a righteous Israelite, a true Israelite. The common thinking behind it all was that it was possible to know all the right ceremonies and rituals but miss the bedrock principles

behind it all. The righteous Israelite would operate on the basis of these principles and would therefore be superior to the priest and Levite.

In telling this story, Jesus sets up the lawyer and the other listeners. By the time they get to the part of the Levite passing by on the other side, they think they know what's coming. They think that a righteous Israelite, a true, patriotic Israelite, will come and rescue the wounded man. Jesus then twists the story and completely shocks the listeners.

We, today, have heard this parable so many times in sermons and Sunday School, we think we know what it is all about. I have often suggested that one way to think about any story from the Bible is to consider carefully where you see yourself. We all know who we would like to be in this story, why the hero, of course. We would like to mount up on our white charger, come riding in and rescue the helpless, innocent victim. We would scoop up that wounded man off the side of the Jericho road, carry him to where he would get the help he needed, pay for it with a silver bullet, and then go riding off in a cloud of dust with a cry of "High-Oh Silver!" The grateful recipients of our assistance would say to each other, "Who was that masked man?" And a voice from heaven would answer, "That was the Lone Presbyterian!"

That is how we would like the story to be, and those listening to Jesus would have been expecting something similar. But the hero in this parable is not a good guy in a white hat, mounted on a white horse. He is indeed wearing a mask, but the mask is the identity of "Samaritan." When the listeners hear this they are shocked. You probably have heard this before, but the Samaritans were a race of half breeds that over the centuries had intermingled with the nations that had conquered Israel. You might remember that shortly after World War II, when countries like France, Belgium, or the Netherlands were liberated from the Nazis, those who had openly corroborated with the Germans were hated and despised. They were regarded as vile traitors, sometimes arrested, imprisoned and executed, but often the victims of terrible and humiliating mob violence. That was the way the Israelites felt about the Samaritans. Last week I talked about companions, of those who you share your bread with. One of the writers of the day stated, "He that eats the bread of a Samaritan is like to one who eats the flesh of swine." You know how the Jews would have felt about that. Then over in John 8:48, the Pharisees call Jesus a "demon-possessed Samaritan." That was the worst name they could think of, a Samaritan controlled by evil spirits.

That was why those listening to this story would have been shocked by this development. They were expecting your typical star spangled Israelite hero and instead Jesus gives them a disgusting Samaritan coming to the rescue. This twist must have completely messed up the mind of the lawyer and the others listening, because now, where were they in the story? Of course, no one wants to be the priest or the Levite, but it would have been impossible for them to somehow see themselves as the Samaritan. That leaves them only one option. Jesus is forcing them to think of themselves as the victim, the wounded man lying beside the road. We know Jesus is deliberately trying to do this because of the question he asks at the end of the parable. The lawyer asks at the beginning, "Who is my neighbor, that I am supposed to love?" At the end Jesus asks, "Who was a neighbor to the man who fell among robbers?" The lawyer can't even say the word "Samaritan," but you can imagine through gritted teeth he replies, "The one who showed him mercy."

Jesus is directly challenging this lawyer's blind patriotism and extreme nationalism. God may have given the law to Moses and the Israelites, but that was not to draw a line between who was in and who was out, who was right and who was wrong. Rather it was to break down the barriers that divide us, to help us realize that loving and obeying God is intertwined with loving all other human beings on this earth.

Every day we are told by the media that we are a deeply divided nation. All sorts of issues are tearing us apart, immigration, racism, abortion, sexism, gender issues, health care issues, climate change and the environment. We all feel it, don't we? But at the same time, we would like to think that we are all kind and decent people. We all would like to think that if we saw someone who needed help, and we could help them, we would do it. If you saw someone unconscious and bleeding, lying along the Jericho road, you would want to help them, no

matter who they were, right? It would not matter their race or religion or politics or anything like that. You would want to help them. I believe you would. We are all good people here.

But that is not what this parable is about. The parable does not ask the question “Who are you willing to help?” The parable asks the question, “If you were the one lying along the Jericho road... If you were in a desperate situation, who or what kind of person would be the most difficult for you to accept their help?” Who would that be? Could you accept help from someone wearing a “Make America Great Again” hat and an NRA button? Or would it be someone wearing an Elizabeth Warren “I Have a Plan for That!” button on a t-shirt with the face of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg? Could you accept help from a white supremacist, a member of the KKK? Or would it be someone wearing a “Black Lives Matter” t-shirt? Who would it be? Could you accept help from someone who vehemently opposes your position on abortion? Would it be a Muslim? An ISIS fighter? An undocumented immigrant? Or would it be an Immigration and Customs Enforcement officer, an ICE officer? We are a divided nation, so it is not too difficult to think of someone who we would rather not owe any kind of favor.

Let’s bring it even closer to home. Who do you know personally, who would be the most difficult for you to allow to help you? Could you accept help from a coworker who has betrayed you and used you to promote their own career? Would it be a relative who has always put you down ever since you were a little kid? What about someone who may have hurt or been a threat to someone you love?

If we try, we can all think of someone whose help we would just as soon do without. In fact, there may be someone who comes to mind and you think, “I would rather die than have them help me.” And perhaps that is very true. But think back. Think about that scene I had you imagine at the beginning. Remember the pain. If you really were in severe pain, frightened, isolated and alone... If you were that desperate, lying along the Jericho road, would you really care who was helping you? Probably not. In the days after I got home from my surgery, when my knee was all painful and swollen, and I needed help to the bathroom, I was very glad Judy was there to help me. But when I was hurting, my pride, my sense of privacy was all gone. I did not care. I would have accepted help from absolutely anyone, anyone at all.

When you start thinking of yourself as the victim in the parable it really changes your perspective. You can hear Jesus say, “Once you were badly hurt, half dead, completely alone, lying along the Jericho road. You could not help yourself, and needed rescue.” Jesus goes on to say, “When I saw you like that my heart was filled with pity. I went out of my way, risked it all and rescued you. So now, all those issues that are so divisive, they must be set aside. Hostilities and grudges must be forgotten. Just as you would have accepted anyone when you were in great pain, so you must accept anyone now that you are greatly loved.”

It is okay to be patriotic, to love our country. It is okay to campaign for a political candidate, to work for justice and peace, and for a cause you believe in. It is okay to be passionate with strong convictions. What is not okay is to allow all that to divide us, to allow that to be impenetrable masks that prevent us from seeing the common humanity we all share. Any time our patriotism or our politics blocks us from loving and accepting another human being, another child of God, then we are unable to love God and be a part of the Beloved Community. It all makes me think of that beautiful song the Langleys sang a few minutes ago. We didn’t want you to miss the words, so we had them up on the screen. Some of them went like this:

One day this all will change, treat people the same. Down with the violence, down with the hate. One day, we’ll all be free, and proud to be under the same sun singing songs of freedom...

All my life I’ve been waiting for, I’ve been praying for, for the people to say that they don’t want to fight no more, there’ll be no more wars, and our children will play. One day, one day...

People still come to Jesus and ask, “What must I do to receive eternal life?” Jesus sings back to us all, “Love God and love your neighbor, and then this all will change, treat people the same. Down with the violence, down with the hate. One day, we’ll all be free, and proud to be under the same sun singing songs of freedom.” Jesus says, “go and do likewise.” Thanks be to God. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

