

“GO & DO LIKEWISE”
Pentecost 7 – Proper 10 – Grace Episcopal Church, Haddonfield, NJ
Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close

The parable of the Good Samaritan is one of the best-known stories from Jesus. It rivals the parable of the Prodigal Son amongst Christians as well known. Both of the stories from Jesus are found in the Gospel of Luke. Both tell us something about the nature of God, the teaching of Jesus and what it means to be a Christian. A Gallup poll taken several years ago asked what motivated people to become volunteers. Surprisingly, nearly two thirds of people cited the parable of the Good Samaritan as one of the main reasons!

This story is so familiar to us, but there is more that we can glean from the parable. Let’s take some time to unpack it today. It has a great deal to say to us about what it means to be a Christian and a Christian community. Let’s see what new learning we can take away from this very familiar story.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is set in Jesus’ ministry as he is going to Jerusalem. On this day, a lawyer comes up to him. Now lawyers did not necessarily function the same way our lawyers do today. They were principally interpreters of the law ... and what law would that be? It would be the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament, and the 10 Commandments. They were the ones who studied and decided how the people were to live out under the law. Along with the scribes and the rabbis, the lawyers contributed to the volumes and volumes of interpretation of the law.

Unfortunately, in the time of Jesus, the rules and the regulations, the interpretation of the law became more important than people and often more important than a relationship with God. The lawyer was probably a Pharisee, one of the religious people of Jesus’ day. But we know from the Gospels that Jesus fought and challenged the scribes, priests and Pharisees more than any other group in his day. Jesus saw the problems with people who become more concerned with the rules than with God or people.

So here comes the lawyer. He asks a question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” It’s a good question, but the fact that he mentions eternal life leads us to think he is a Pharisee. The other interesting point is that the lawyer comes to “test” Jesus ... he is concerned with scoring some kind of point in the conversation. He wants to prove something about himself ... so his sincerity is questionable.

What does Jesus do? He responds with a question himself! Have you ever noticed that Jesus rarely answers directly? It can make us nuts, can’t it? A question is answered with a question. But Jesus sees more than we can imagine. His approach has a purpose. “What does the law say?” The lawyer answers by citing two pieces of Old Testament Scripture from Deuteronomy (which we read today) and from Leviticus. It’s very familiar to us and its known as the “Summary of the Law” in Matthew’s Gospel ... love God with all your heart, mind, strength and soul and love your neighbor.

Jesus answers, “You got it right!” This is Jesus’ powerful understanding of the law, the way to live in relationship with God and each other. What follows next is also powerful. Jesus says to the lawyer, “God and do likewise.” It’s not just enough to know the law; it has to be lived out in one’s life. What is being said to the lawyer is being said to us nearly 2,000 years later ... love God and love others. All our worship, all our study has to be followed by action! By doing!

This in itself would be enough. We could stop right here, but the lawyer is not finished. We hear he wants to “justify himself” (notice the focus is not on God, but on himself). “Who is my neighbor?” He wants to press Jesus for more. He wants to know what the boundaries of what he has said are ... he wants to know just how far he has to go ... and where he can stop ... he wants the limits. This is always a bad

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move with Jesus! If we go looking for the least that is expected of us, we find Jesus pressing us on and beyond the limitations. There is always more that Jesus expects of us! What follows is this wonderful and radical parable.

Today we have lost much of the radical nature of the story. We will see why in a moment. Jesus opens the story by telling us a man goes down from Jerusalem to Jericho. This means he’s going downhill ... what’s more, it probably means that he is leaving worship in the Temple to return home. Now that’s a bummer. He’s leaving church to head home and he gets mugged! What gives! That’s a sermon for another day. Anyways, the man is beaten, robbed and left for dead. Tragedy strikes.

Now the story continues, and this part makes me a little nervous. a priest comes by ... sees the dying man ... and walks by him! What? It gets even better ... a Levite comes upon the man, sees him, and walks on by! Here are the people responsible for worship in the Temple, the religious people, and they ignore the man in need. Before we become too judgmental, where have we walked by someone in need? When is it that we saw a homeless man approaching us, and either crossed to the other side of the street and put our head down so as not to make eye contact?

What possible reason is there for these two men to ignore the man in need? One answer has been the Jewish law about touching blood. If you were to touch anything one (or animal) blood ... you became unclean. This meant that you were unable to participate in community or worship until you went through the ritual requirements and time to become clean. What seems to be more important than human care is keeping the rules for these two men. Where is it in our lives that we make our ways more important than caring for others?

Now the story another twist that Jesus is so keen and adept at doing. A Samaritan comes along and seeds the man. Now before we go much further ... we need to know that Jews and Samaritans hated each other. They would not mingle, intermarry or associate under any circumstances. The problem came centuries before when the Jews were carried off into the Babylonian captivity. The Samaritans to the north of Judea remained in the land. During the exile, we hear from prophets like Isaiah how the Jewish people changed in the way they worshipped. They longed for the chance to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple. Their focus of religion was only in the Temple and Jerusalem.

The Samaritans shared a common history and ancestors with the Jews. But they worshipped God differently. They had a different worship site. The result is that the two people insisted that only they were right and the other was wrong. Sound vaguely familiar? Here we are today in our own Church struggling with who is right, who is in charge ... and in the meantime, we are missing the very essence of our call ... to love God and to love others. For the Jews and the Samaritans, there was no love for the other ... only hate and animosity.

To understand just how bad this was ... we need to think who might be the Samaritans for us. Perhaps they are the illegal Hispanic immigrants, or perhaps even more so ... Muslims. We may all worship one God, but the way we worship or the place we worship is so essential to us that we exclude the others from our presence or community. For the Jews, the Samaritans were the enemy.

So here he comes, the Samaritan. Listen carefully to what happens. First he sees the man in need, next, he has pity on him ... the word pity here might easily be translated into our word, compassion. Finally, he acts to care the for the man’s needs! The enemy, the Samaritan, acts out of compassion to bind the

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man’s wounds, carry him to a place where he can be treated, pays for the care ... and if this isn’t enough, he tells the inn keeper that he’ll be back and cover all the additional costs! This is the man who goes beyond the law, beyond the expectations to care for another!

In the Samaritan, Jesus has given us the example of what we are to do. We too are to see the needs of others in our world. Then we are to be moved with compassion ... the desire to identify with their needs and do something about it. Finally, we are to act. We are called as Christians to DO SOMETHING. Here is not only the model for us, but it reflects the very way that Jesus lived his life!

Jesus turns to the lawyer and asks him who was a neighbor to the wounded man. The hatred of Samaritans is so great, the lawyer can’t even say his name, he only responds, and “I suppose the one who helped him.” Jesus repeats what he has said earlier to the lawyer, “Go and do likewise.” There it is again, the call to do something. Our lives as Christians are to be marked by action! Sometimes we will have to forget about our special rules and regulations and do something to care for another. We are called to be the Good Samaritan.

I recently finished my second book by Greg Mortenson, “Stones into Schools.” He was the author of “Three Cups of Tea.” It’s the story of Greg, son of Lutheran missionary parents in Africa, and the way he has lived into becoming a Samaritan. Greg grew up and became a mountain climber. On a trip to Pakistan to climb one particular mountain, he failed to reach the summit. As he was returning, he became separated from his Muslim guide. He spent several days and nights without food or shelter in the high mountains and nearly died. His guide managed to find him, and took him to his village to recover.

While he was there, he noticed that the children did their school lessons outside in the open, cold air. When he asked the Muslim guide what he could do to repay his kindness and hospitality, the man asked him to build a school for the girls of the village. There were no places for the girls to learn to read or write. There was no building to house the children. We complain about budget cuts, activity fees, teachers and administrators, politicians and property taxes, but we have some of the best schools in the world. In this remote part of Pakistan, the children had nothing.

“Three Cups of Tea” tells Mortenson’s story of how he became the advocate of building schools in Pakistan for Muslim girls. He learned that education of the girls had to best chance, not bombs, to stem the tide of terrorism. “Stones into Schools” is the continuation of his story and the telling of how this ministry expanded into Afghanistan as well. The books are testaments to how we can overcome hatred, respect each other despite our differences, and care for the needs of others. Greg Mortenson is for me, a Good Samaritan. I highly recommend both books (put them on your summer reading lists!).

So here we are ... unpacking the parable of the Good Samaritan. It speaks down through the ages to us about what it means to be a Christian ... to see, to have compassion and to do something about the needs we see. There can be no passing by on the other side of the road for us ... we are called to action! The challenge is for each of us to find ways to do this.

One way might be to talk to our young people who went on the mission trip to Harrisburg this summer. When I talk to them, they tell me how this experience changed their lives. They met people from all around the country that wanted to make a difference. They felt good about helping others. When one of the adults who went on the trip arrived back home, she ran up to me and said, “I just want to warn you ...” Great! That ‘s not exactly what I want to hear about a youth trip! But she continues, “ ... these kids want

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to do more outreach!” Wow! Here’s the example we need to incorporate in our lives! We would do well to model ourselves after them!

So here it is ... the parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus teaches us to see, to have compassion and to act on the other person’s need! When we do that, we are living into the summary of the law, to love God and to love others. I have only one thing left to say ... GO AND DO LIKEWISE! Amen.