

## The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost: July 10, 2016

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The Episcopal Church of St. Mary the Virgin, San Francisco, CA

Text: Luke 10:25-37

Title: Showing mercy

There are a handful of truly archetypal parables: ones that capture a universal feeling, experience, or divine reality with near perfection. You want to know who God is? What the kingdom of God is like? Meditate on the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Want to know how Jesus would have you live? How to be a member of the human family? For that, there's the story we just heard: the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

It all starts with a lawyer, who knows he must love God with heart, soul, strength, and mind; and neighbor as self, to inherit eternal life. And yet he wants to be clear about the limits on *who* he is obligated to love so lavishly, because surely there are limits. Surely there are neighbors, and not-neighbors. It is to answer this question that Jesus tells the parable.

A man, presumably a Jew, like the lawyer and Jesus, is walking from Jerusalem to Jericho when he is mugged. Brutally beaten, stripped of his possessions and his clothing, he is left for dead. A priest and then a Levite walk by - people we would naturally assume would help: men of the same faith, ethnic group, and culture, as the man who was attacked. Only they can't be bothered. They actually cross to the other side of the road to avoid him.

But then a Samaritan comes along, and unlike the priest and the Levite, he is moved with pity. He feels *compassion* for the man. If we are to truly appreciate this parable, it's important for us to know that Samaritans and Jews were enemies, and not just of the Golden State / Cleveland Cavaliers variety. The history of animosity and distrust between the groups went back over 800 years. For a Samaritan to care for a Jew would be a little like a Palestinian activist stopping for an Israeli official, or vice versa; a member of ISIS caring for an American soldier, or vice versa; a police officer tending to a Black Lives Matter protestor, or vice versa.

Jesus means to jar the lawyer - to shock him. Even to shake him. *Those people shouldn't be capable of kindness; generosity; compassion.* And the Samaritan doesn't just leave the Jewish man a few dollars: he cleans and bandages his wounds, takes him to an inn, tends him, and makes financial arrangements for his care. The lawyer is stunned by this total reversal of expectations, but the story works. It is clear who of the three men knows how to be a neighbor: "The one who showed him mercy."

What does it mean to be merciful? *How* do we love God with heart, soul, strength, and mind, and our neighbors - ALL of them - as ourselves? This is the question the parable invites, but it is also a question I imagine many of us brought with us this morning. It has been a difficult, heartbreaking week, in a difficult and heartbreaking season for the world. It was a week that saw the deaths of Philandro Castile and Alton Sterling, both black men shot by police officers, and the shooting of five Dallas cops soon thereafter. This in the wake of recent attacks in Dhaka, Bhagdad, and Istanbul, and the mass shooting in Orlando. The violence, and the fear and hatred that fuels such violence, can feel overwhelming. It is hard to know what to say, and what to do, in response to such tragedy.

Today is also a Creation Care Sunday here at St. Mary's, when we gather to honor the goodness of the created order, and the sanctity and miracle of life. We set aside Sundays like this because we so often forget how to be a good neighbor to the earth and to all living beings. In a sense, this is at the root of every social, political, and cultural issue that plagues us, from

environmental degradation to systemic racism: we forget how to be a good neighbor. We deny the sacred and living spirit of creation. We deny the animate soul of all living beings. And we deny the humanity of those different from us, and even those like us with different opinions. Then, blind to our common identity as creatures of God, blind to the fact that we love God BY loving neighbor, we become capable of terrible things, and capable of looking away from terrible things others do, some even in our name or on our behalf. Given an option between going out of our way to care for a wounded world, a wounded community, a wounded brother or sister, or continuing on our way, we have all, at some point, chosen to cross the street.

The “issues” seem so big, and sometimes so far away. But they aren’t – not really. On February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 20 year-old Amilcar Perez-Lopez was shot and killed by two undercover police officers. The police claimed that they acted in self-defense, but two autopsies have since confirmed that Perez-Lopez was killed by six shots to the head and back as he fled for his life. Almost a year and a half later, the DA is still investigating whether criminal charges should be filed against these officers. In a meeting with community leaders on June 2<sup>nd</sup>, the DA acknowledged that this investigation has been impeded because, first, the Police failed to report the incident, and second, the lead officer had the Medical Examiner remove the body from the crime scene before the DA’s office was able to conduct its investigation. These actions were taken in clear violation of Police Department protocols. Amilcar lived in the Mission, and lost his life at the corner of Folsom and 24<sup>th</sup> Streets.

This our problem, too, as are all the tragedies and traumas that break God’s heart. As people of faith, we are called to honor the humanity and listen to the stories of all those involved. Thankfully, the Parable of the Good Samaritan not only points us toward mercy – it can help us figure out where to begin our own response. Jesus tells us that, unlike the Priest and the Levite, the Samaritan “was moved with pity.” This, I believe, is where we must start.

Whenever we see a human being suffering, we are seeing a neighbor in need, and we are called to respond with compassion. But before we respond we have to feel – we have to feel the sadness and the powerlessness; how angry and confused and scared we may be; we have to feel our fears about responding, our insecurities about our ignorance; we have to wrestle with our concern around what others might think of us; we have to sit with our shame around doing so little in the past. It’s interesting to note that the word pity has the same linguistic root as PIETY. To experience pity – a genuine sympathy evoked by the misfortune and distress of our neighbor is the first step in practicing a piety that will bring us closer to Jesus.

So ask the hard questions. Move toward the hurting people and places you encounter. Educated yourself about whatever issues break your heart, and seek out the human faces of each. Don’t hide from the truth, and don’t go it alone.

How will we show mercy for one another, for our neighbors, near and far, for our hurting earth, for all that has life? There are as many good and faithful answers to that question as there are people in this room. But show mercy we must. There is no other way. There is no other hope.

“Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man?”

"The one who showed him mercy."

Jesus said to him, and Jesus *says to us*, "Go, and do likewise." **Amen.**