

Sermon: Love is messy business  
Luke 10:25-37  
5 Pentecost, Year C

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July 14, 2019

“And when the Samaritan saw him he was moved...”

Most of you have heard this Good Samaritan story a bazillion times. And if you haven't heard this story you have at least heard that phrase, “the Good Samaritan.” In our culture it has come to refer to someone, a stranger, who has stopped to help a fellow stranger in need.

This story within a story begins with an encounter between Jesus and a lawyer. Luke says that the lawyer wants to test Jesus. “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” And ever wise Jesus says for the man to look at what is written in the law. Isn't that what a lawyer should do? The lawyer goes on to read the same words we say each Sunday, “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.” But wanting to justify himself, he asks Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

To be fair, lawyers are trained to be precise, informed with the facts, equipped with debate skills, bent on justice, and to be rule followers. The question is a fair one, the lawyer wants to know exactly who his neighbor is so that he can follow that law, follow that rule, get control of the situation. Cross that “t” and dot that “i”. How many of us have a bit of this lawyer in us? Seeking refuge in rules. We often want to know what precisely it is we have to do to be accepted by God, want to know what the rules and boundaries are for us to be a part of God's kingdom. How many of us find ourselves wanting to justify ourselves in our behavior. Just what is the minimum daily requirement of ways we are to love our neighbor?

And then rather than give the lawyer a clear, clean, precise, black and white answer, he tells a story, which is so often Jesus' M.O., his *modus operandi*. Jesus understands human nature well enough to know that the black and white answer just pings off of us like hail on a windshield. And the *story* answer can often penetrate our psyches in deeper and more meaningful ways.

A man has been left for dead along the side of the road, a road that is dusty and deserted and probably pretty scary place as it was known for robberies. Two men, a priest and a Levite, who one would EXPECT to help, for whatever reason, choose to ignore the wounded man (doesn't it figure these are the *clergymen*?); and then a Samaritan actually sees the man, stops to help him and goes the extra mile to make sure he is o.k. A Samaritan? “So what?” you might think. A Samaritan is a good person, right? Well, reverse the tape two thousand years and you would find that in this first century Palestine world, the Jews *hated* the Samaritans and they had hated them for centuries. The Samaritans were despised and unaccepted.

No doubt the lawyer, who is bright and perceptive enough, must have been disturbed to hear this twist in the story. Instead of Jesus being tested by the lawyer, the lawyer is

tested by Jesus. He flips the understanding of the lawyer who wants to affirm the law as the gospel to the gospel as law; Jesus turns away from the measurable and precise to something beyond measure, something beyond rules. Jesus takes him beyond a black and white, two-dimensional answer and offers the multicolored, multi-layered brilliance of Godly love instead.

Jesus invites the lawyer to a new understanding of the ways of God that involve the human heart, that involve human action. We don't know why the clergymen ignored the wounded man but whatever the reasons, in doing so they protected themselves, kept themselves safe and closed off to the one in need. By ignoring the wounded man they may have kept themselves ritually clean. When the priest and Levite walked to the other side of the road, they shielded themselves from the messiness of the situation.

Maybe it's because he grew up on a farm but my husband doesn't mind getting his hands dirty. He will pick up an interesting slug on the sidewalk in a heartbeat, will drink the water in a strange lake, he will reach out and touch weird fungi growing on the ground. Not afraid of getting his hands dirty. He would do well on the show "Dirty Jobs."

The Samaritan was willing to get his hands dirty for the sake of love. He came near the wounded man, *saw* him, and was moved with pity; he went to him, bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them, put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn and took care of him. One giant act of kindness. The Samaritan was willing to let the man in need touch him. He allowed himself to be vulnerable and to risk his own discomfort for the sake of love for the wounded man. No doubt at the end of the day the Samaritan was dirty, bloody, sweaty, tired and had less money. This love thing is messy business! Nothing neat and tidy about it. And yet by entering into love we are entering eternal life!

To truly love and to be loved we must allow ourselves to be vulnerable. When one helps a neighbor there is vulnerability on both sides. It is risky to ask for help, risky to receive help and risky to give help. Only in vulnerability and humility do we see a need for one another, a need for God. We are confronted with folks in need every day, family members, friends and strangers. We can choose to see them as a burden, an imposition, an interruption or we can choose to see them as human beings, the face of Christ. It won't always be clear as to the best ways to help them. Just as most of us don't pick up slugs off the sidewalk we must use discernment when we act out of love! We have to figure out the best ways to use the resources God has given us.

So roll up your sleeves, risk your own ritual cleanliness or your pride to show a little love in this world. Lord knows the world needs your kindness, needs your willingness to get your hands dirty. This world is crying out to experience the multi-colored, multi-dimensional love of God through YOU – you, through your smile; you, through your kind word; you, through sharing what is in your wallet; you through your prayer; you, through your presence. Allow God to use you!

Amen.