

The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 10, Year C
July 10, 2016

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Amos 7:7-17
Colossians 1:1-14
Luke 10:25-37

From Amos: The Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today's Gospel reading is the very familiar story of the Good Samaritan. The story is vivid in its description of the traveler who got mugged and was left for dead at the side of the road. The priest and the scribe both avoid the fallen man for two reasons. First, if this is a corpse, then to come into contact with it would make them ritually unclean. More to the point they did not want to find out. They did not want to get involved. After all it was not their business. This man, even though unfortunate, was none of their affair. In fact it might even be a scam. As soon as someone came over to look, the man might leap up and mug the would be rescuer.

Now Jesus increases the dramatic tension in his story. The next man is not merely a lay person in contrast to the two religious officials. He is a foreigner and a heretic. Ever since Jeroboam the son of Nebat refused to accept Rehoboam, the son of Solomon as king of Israel, the Northern kingdom had not worshiped in Jerusalem but at two shrines at Bethel and at Dan. It was Omri the father of Ahab who built Samaria as the capital of the Northern Kingdom. Thus, for close to nine hundred years the Samaritans were regarded as both renegades and heretics.

So it is a hated and despised Samaritan that helped the man. One can imagine how the characters might be framed were Jesus telling the story in our society. The Samaritan came upon the man and was moved with pity. The translation is far too weak. The word is ἐσπλανγχνίσθη. (esplangchnisthe) It is cognate with our word "spleen". It is more like "his guts were wrenched" at the sight. The man was overcome with compassion. He did not stop to think the situation through. He made no calculations. He did not consider it an ethical problem.

He saw a wounded man and helped.

It is a wonderful story of how people ought to help each other in times of need. It highlights how compassion often comes most readily from those who have themselves suffered. We love the irony of who the hero is.

Except those are not the points Jesus is making. Let us recall the conversation in which this story is embedded. The expert on Mosaic law comes to Jesus and asks, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus responds, "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?" The Law says I must love my neighbor. Who is my neighbor?" The Torah expert wants to justify himself. That is, he wants to be sure that his level of uprightness is enough to get him eternal life. And yet, there is something deep inside him that is not satisfied, or else he would not have come to Jesus with the question at all. The question he asks is one that we all ask. That is, what is the status that a person must have in order for him to have a claim on me? Whom must I love and whom may I ignore?

Jesus does not answer the question at all. It is the wrong question. Instead he plays his own version of Jeopardy. He gives the answer to another question. He ends the story by asking the lawyer, "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" The lawyer, who cannot quite bring himself to say it was the Samaritan, responds, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

So what is the right question? It is not, "Who is the neighbor that I am obliged to love so that I can fulfill the law? What must I do to get credit?" The right question in Jesus' view is, "How should I behave so that I can become a neighbor?"

All of us want to limit our liability. We want to be reasonable in our exposure. After all one cannot simply respond to every need one sees. There must be some rational principle by

which one can tell whom one should love and whom one need not love. If I can know who my neighbor is, then I am off the hook regarding anyone else. There must be some limits to what can be expected of me. The Summary of the Law makes good sense. Love God, love your neighbor. Up to a point. So who is my neighbor?

Aaannh! No credit. No. The question is not "Who is my neighbor?" The right question is "What do you mean by love?" Or maybe even not "Who is this person in need and what is his claim on me?" but "Who am I and what is my character? Can I be moved with compassion. Am I the kind of person whose guts are wrenched at the sight of suffering?"

The problem is that we want to be able to see a situation, analyze it and then respond. We desire a policy. If a person is in the right relation to us, has some claim on us by virtue of blood or community, then we will respond. If he is a neighbor, we will act like a neighbor. The corollary is that if he is not a neighbor, we need not act like a neighbor. Then, this poor sad world will keep on growing poorer and sadder.

Jesus is not out to make people nicer. He wants to invite us into a much more exciting adventure than merely being good. His purpose is to turn the world on its head. He is out to build the Kingdom of God, and to remake the world to God's liking. He invites us into this magnificent enterprise. So he tells us how to make neighbors. How to build relationships. How to construct communities. How to treat human beings as icons of God.

So we overhear this story. It is not ultimately about how to be good neighbors. It is about how to build the city of God. It is about how to change the world. It is about how to make a neighbor out of a stranger, out of a foreigner, out of an enemy, out of a person who is different, or frightening, or unpleasant. So who acted like a neighbor? Who created a new neighborhood out of nothing? The one who had mercy? The one who imitated God himself. The one who followed the leading of the heart and his guts.

This is the plumb line by which God measures our world. This is the standard by which God builds the Kingdom. Here is R. S. Thomas poem, *The Kingdom*.

It's a long way off but inside it
 There are quite different things going on:
 Festivals at which the poor man
 Is king and the consumptive is
 Healed; mirrors in which the blind look
 At themselves and love looks at them
 Back; and industry is for mending
 The bent bones and the minds fractured
 By life. It's a long way off, but to get
 There takes no time and admission
 Is free, if you will purge yourself
 Of desire, present yourself with
 Your need only and the simple offering
 Of your faith, green as a leaf.

And here is a facebook post from Alinda's and my twenty-something deaf god-daughter on
 Friday after the news of yet another shooting:

Hey folks, I just wanted to say I love you all, whether we agree or disagree on issues. All of you, conservatives, liberals, independents and others, black, brown, white, native and other colors and ethnicities, christians, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, and others, young and old, deaf or not, disabled, lgbt+ and straight, tall and short, refugees and citizens, police, ems, and folks in other occupations. All of you matter a lot and I am sorry for the pain and grief that have been happening recently. And I know I can't please everyone but this has been on my mind. You all matter. Later, folks!

Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" The lawyer said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus says to us, "Go and do likewise."