

Pentecost 7C Proper 10 Sermon 071110
Amos 7:7-17; Psalm 82
Colossians 1:1-14; Luke 10:25-37

In the name of one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

There are not many Christians – in fact there probably are not many Americans – who are not familiar with the parable of the Good Samaritan. The name “Good Samaritan” is used by churches and hospitals throughout this country. Anywhere you see an organization of any kind that bills itself as a place that “does good,” you may well find the name Good Samaritan.

While I was in seminary, I saw one such place in San Antonio. During a semester break I worked for a week at the Good Samaritan Center – a place built in a very poor neighborhood, whose mission it is to help local people in a variety of ways. The center offers a food pantry, minor medical services, daycare and educational programs. It is a safe haven in an otherwise very dangerous neighborhood. And it is a *very* good ministry. But is it emblematic of what Jesus really meant when He told the parable of the Good Samaritan? After all, as with most modern social service agencies, there are some fairly stringent requirements that people have to meet in order to receive services from Good Samaritan.

Several times in both Mark and Luke’s Gospels, Jesus said, “Let anyone with ears to hear, listen.” This week I plugged a search for “Good Samaritan” into YouTube. Try it. You’ll get a very interesting cross section of amateur videos in which people have

tried to dramatically retell this parable – some using first century style clothing and King James language and others trying to “update” the telling with modern people, language and clothing, and still others using Legos or “claymation” to tell the story to children. There are dozens of such videos out there. Some of them are listed as being “amazing” or “brand new.” But it seemed to me that despite their obvious differences in appearance, all of these videos simply looked at the message of the parable on its face. None of them tried to see if there was some message beyond the obvious that Jesus might have been trying to get at. As with all of Jesus’ parables, if we only look at the surface of the story, we really are not using the ears of our hearts to hear what He is saying. Let’s look a little deeper and see what else might be in the story.

First, we need to understand the injured traveler. He was traveling alone on one of the roughest sections of road in the region. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was steep, rocky and full of places for bandits to hide – and hide they did. It was common knowledge that if you traveled the road to Jericho alone you risked almost certain attack from the numerous bands of thieves and robbers. So ... the traveler’s troubles are, in some ways, troubles of his own making. His wounds are, in essence self-inflicted. And we all know how hard it is for people to feel sorry for someone who has done something stupid that resulted in injury to himself.

Second, the two who passed by the wounded traveler were not bad people. The priest and the Levite both had every reason to believe that the traveler was dead. Jesus

told His listeners that the man was “half dead.” Those who worked in the Temple, like priests and Levites, could not – under any circumstances – risk ritual defilement by touching a dead body. Such uncleanness would result in them being unable to exercise their vocations – rendering them useless before the eyes of God. In their minds, they did the only *proper* thing for them to do under the circumstances. With hindsight we can disagree with their decisions. But they felt that they had no decision to make.

Finally – the Good Samaritan was someone whom no one would have *wanted* to have stop and rescue them. Having a Samaritan rescue and care for an Israelite would have been akin to an Aggie being rescued by a T-sip. Seriously, it would have been much like a modern day Israeli being rescued by a Palestinian; like a fundamentalist, jingoistic American Christian being rescued by a member of Al Qaeda. This was a sworn enemy who stopped to help the injured man, and who then went above and beyond the call by paying for his continued care.

So what was it that Jesus was trying to say to His listeners that day?

That loving your neighbor is sometimes *very difficult*.

Sometimes your neighbor gets him or herself into a horrible jam by doing something that you view as exceptionally stupid. He ends up homeless because he has a drug addiction. Sometimes she can no longer take care of herself or her children because she has never developed any skills – her entire life having been controlled by men who beat her and kept her from learning how to care for herself. And she never left when she

could have. Occasionally we even find a neighbor who is broke and needs help because he squandered his money – just plain wasted it; at least that’s how it looks to us. Jesus’ point was: no matter how stupid they are, we are called by this parable to love them by helping them if we can.

And we aren’t allowed to look to other people to take care of the dirty work of helping people who don’t seem all that deserving. We aren’t allowed to look to our religious leaders – our modern day priests and Levites – and to say, “well, I don’t have to do it because they will handle it.” Who knows, there may be more or less “valid” reasons why those people cannot help in this particular instance. And Jesus calls *ALL* people to love neighbors as they love themselves.

Now comes the hardest part. Even if the person we are to help is not someone who foolishly self-inflicted a wound, that person may well be the person we despise the most. And we are still supposed to do what we can to love that person as we love ourselves. Who gets on your very last nerve? Whose presence in any room makes that room one size too small for you to be in? That is the person for whom you are to be the helping presence. The one who talks incessantly – and spends most of those words on complaints – is the one we are called to sit with when they are shut in. The one who seems constantly to be on the lookout for a way to gain control over every situation, is the one for whom we should become servants when that need arises. Loving your neighbor as yourself is hard indeed. That is the real point of the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Most of us have no hope of pulling off the feat of truly loving our neighbor as ourselves ... unless we *first* love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. If we are truly in a solid relationship with God, through prayer, worship, study and service, then we will be in the place where we can tap into the power of the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit who gives us the ability to discern when it is *our* turn to be the Good Samaritan. And it is the Spirit who gives us the power and the wherewithal to *be* that Samaritan.

We all struggle with the age old question, “what can *I* do to help.” There are so many wounded travelers in the world – people with whom we may have some natural enmity, and whose wounds are decidedly self-inflicted. We know that we cannot help them all. It can be so overwhelming that it is easier and more comfortable to help none of them, since we cannot (and do not want to) help every one of them. But remember the end of the parable. “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” (Jesus) said. “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise.’”

Go ... and do likewise. Amen