

Proper 10 Year C 2013

“Which of these three, do you think was a neighbor to this man...the lawyer said, the one who showed him mercy....Jesus said go and do likewise.”

I've told y'all this story some years ago, but it seems apt to tell it again in light of today's gospel text. Our housekeeper, Azzie Lee, who worked for my family, my other mama, made provision that at her death her uncle Kaysaw could live in her house as long as he could take care of himself. Sure enough she died quite unexpectedly and uncle Kay moved into her house... And not so soon after her death, one afternoon a neighbor, who knew our relationship with Azzie Lee, called my mother and said uncle Kay was bad sick and needed help...she said he had been bed ridden for at least a week...my mother called me at the office and told me she needed my help...apprising me of the situation...she picked me up and we drove through town, few words between us... past where all the sidewalks end, literally across the railroad tracks, and onto toad street, the dirt road where Uncle Kay now lived, where Azzie Lee had lived all of her adult life...she said to me firmly...this is going to be hard...we entered the house, despite the stench, we bathed him, we washed and changed his soiled sheets, did laundry and we called a doctor cousin of ours to see him the next morning. The neighbor who had called us said she could take him...and that she would keep us posted...It turned out he, some eighty plus years old had cancer and would soon die...but as we all attended to him...all he could do was humbly and genuinely thank us, and the Lord, he would thank in the same breath.

This most familiar story in Luke made me remember this life-changing event in my life. This story only appears in Luke, but as is the rest of this gospel it is a vignette onto seeing what the kingdom of God is like. But it is easy to make short order of this passage, because on the surface the meaning is fairly clear...who was the neighbor? the priest, the Levite, or the Samaritan...and of course we all know the answer...the Samaritan because he showed mercy. But I want to dig a little deeper here, add a little context and give hopefully this seemingly simple story some depth.

We've already discussed the Jews hatred of the Samaritans....so that's operative here for the audience...Just a few passages earlier we see Jesus headed to Jerusalem passing through the heart of Samaria, breaking a cultural boundary....so Luke is continuing his consistent theme of boundary breaking....Here we have a Samaritan passing through Jewish territory, just

a few miles from Jerusalem itself...this Samaritan is outside the ethnic and cultural boundary.

Now some scholars make much ado about the priest and Levite passing by the half dead victim; that Jesus is condemning the Jewish hierarchy and its customs and its jaundiced insensitivity; but in truth in the first century near east it was taboo, ritually unclean to touch a sick or wounded person, because it was believed that the sick and the wounded are the way they are because of some evil possession, and that they too by touching them may contract such a condition or worse.....so the audience would have some sympathy for the priest and the Levite...Here Luke is painting a picture of true compassion, and the risk of compassion...the Samaritan shares the same cultural taboos as the Jews and yet he risks, an outsider to say the least, to take care of this man...Of course the irony in this story is that the Samaritan is the Christ, the stranger we are unwilling to trust...I'm sure at this story's telling there was squirming in the seats.

But so far we haven't considered the innkeeper, who is nameless and seemingly, as Shakespeare would put it, a rude mechanical character in this story...but I think the innkeeper belongs at the heart of the story's moral...first a brief excursus on innkeepers in the ancient world...they were at the bottom of the social pyramid...most were seen as scoundrels...known to evict guests from their rooms in the night after receiving a better rate from a late arrival...many inns were also brothels...they were known to confiscate property of their guests protected by the paid off soldiers of the empire.

So the audience is doubly shocked...this Jesus allegory is tied to a Samaritan and an innkeeper, marginal outcasts...the Samaritan must leave and place the victim in the charge of the innkeeper...pays him what amounts to a deposit and leaves...the innkeeper is the one, far beyond the call of duty, who must attend to the dressings of the wounds...wash the soiled sheets...monitor the bedpan...he's got the toughest job of all...so he is a prominent figure in this story, just like Azzie Lee's next door neighbor was in my story I have now come to realize...she who called for help and kept watch over uncle Kay for months...I thought the story was about my mother and me...now I know it is about the neighbor.

Here are the points I want to make, I think evident in this text: that ministry is collaborative...we can't do it alone, ministry is partnership in community; also ministry is about trust...look at our story: the Samaritan entrusts the deposit to the innkeeper, knowing the reputation of innkeepers, and the innkeeper, a Judean, trusts the Samaritan, knowing the reputation among the Jews of Samaritans, that he will return and repay him for

whatever expenses he incurred...the gospel lives and breathes along an axis of trust...and like love, trust is a courageous act of the will.

The prophet Amos from whom we heard this morning speaks of a plumb line...the golden thread that points to the truth of who we are in relationship with God. I believe Luke here is pointing to the way of Christ as that very plumb line...the way of compassion and mercy; of collaboration and trust, trust of our fellow sojourner even if a stranger.

In our post modern world will we learn compassion and mercy... I think we are...we see it everywhere...but perhaps more difficult is whether we will learn to collaborate with the other, the stranger, the proverbial stranger, the proverbial innkeepers of our world....will we muster our will to collaborate and trust those strange to us, even our presumed enemies, to act together for the sake of the good, for the sake of healing our world, the stench notwithstanding. I think trust might be the missing piece in our struggles these days...but I believe that in trusting the other, then dignity is granted there. Trust, an act of the will, perhaps the sacred bridge between strangers... The Greek word for trust is also the word for faith....Let us have faith in one another that we can heal together; that we can bring justice, that we can raise up the half dead of our world. May we see the Christ past where the sidewalks end and the roads unpaved. Shall we endeavor to be the neighbor God sees us to be....The victim in our own day, in whatever form victimization takes, is the neighbor whom we are called to love....The Samaritan and the innkeeper are the neighbors we are called to be....let us go and do likewise.