

Sermon preached by The Rev. Danielle Thompson
The Chapel of St. James the Fisherman, Wellfleet, MA
Sunday, July 10, 2016
Proper 10, Year C: Amos 7:7-17; Psalm 82; Colossians 1:1-14; Luke 10:25-37

Jesus clearly knows how to handle an unwelcome question. When a lawyer asks him today, less-than-innocently, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus turns it around, and sticks it right back on him: “Well, what is written in the law?” Jesus asks. “What do *you* find there? I’m not making this stuff up, after all!” And suddenly, it looks pretty silly for a supposed expert on Torah to be asking a question even we Gentiles know the answer to—particularly if you are used to a Rite I Eucharist: *Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart ...thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself*. Score one for Jesus.

But what do you do if the questioner comes back for more? What if he throws you a curve ball, like this same lawyer, who, trying to save face, asks Jesus one more time, “But Teacher, just who *is* my neighbor?” Again, Jesus is not new to the game. He knows a trick that anyone who has ever been on the hot-plate knows, and it’s one he uses all the time. When logical answers and appeal to the law all fail—what do you do? You tell a story. Even if it’s a story nobody really wants to hear.

Except at first, everyone *does* want to hear the story Jesus is telling today. It’s got a setup, a list of threes, that was as popular among Jesus’ friends as it is for us, like in our jokes that begin, “A priest, a rabbi, and a minister walk into a bar.” [Or the *less* Protestant version: a priest, a rabbi, and a duck walk into a bar.] In the storytelling of Jesus’ time, the sequence of people went from the highest religious class—a priest—to the average person—a regular Jew—and *he*, not the religious professionals, would perform the ethical good that resolved the story’s problem. We may wonder if these stories reflected the sort of benign anti-clericalism that exists in any structured religious system, while also allowing for real critique of the clergy, who were sometimes perceived as being removed from the demands of faithful, everyday living and preoccupied with ritual and politics. Amaziah, the priest from Beth-el in the reading from Amos today, is this type of figure, who is more concerned with keeping the peace than with hearing the unleashed word of God from the prophet.

It is no surprise then, to Jesus’s audience, first that a man was robbed and beaten on the road from Jerusalem—that was a dangerous trip in more ways than one—and second, that a priest did not stop to help him. He could have been afraid that the body was a trap; he could have been worried about time; he could have been disgusted by what he saw. As a priest, he should have been able to overcome all of these things, but in this type of story, nobody would have expected him to. *Typical priest!* they would have thought. And the same thing for the Levite, a priest’s assistant. You can imagine Jesus’ crowd looking at each other and rolling their eyes: *they’re all the same!* they would have laughed.

The surprise comes next. Jesus’ hearers are ready for the third person, a regular Jewish man, to wander down the road, save the day, and impart a sense of satisfaction to the crowd. But instead of an upstanding member of their own group, Jesus has a different actor lined up. *A Samaritan*, Jesus says, *traveling, saw the injured man, had compassion for him, and drew near to him. He*

bandaged the man's wounds, put him on his own animal, brought him to safety, and provided for his needs. The Samaritan didn't ask for repayment, and he didn't ask for thanks.

Crickets. A totally unexpected—and unwelcome—twist on what ought have been a familiar kind of story. And we know the reason why: Jews and Samaritans did not get along. The history here is a little confusing, but it's worth remembering that in ancient Palenstine, long before Jesus' birth, people living in Israel in the North and Judea in the South were both exiled at different times by different foreign powers, and then reintroduced generations later—at different times, by different foreign powers. In a region called Samaria, right in-between Judea to the South and Galilee to the far North, exiles were resettled among different kinds of Gentiles and pagans, with whom they inter-married and inter-changed customs in a way that did not seem right to the Jewish people of Jesus' time. Jews who were resettled in Judea and Galilee had nothing to do with Samaritans and Samaritans had nothing to do with them—even though Jews from Galilee, like Jesus, would travel back and forth through Samaria every year to worship in their proper temple in Jerusalem. The depth of enmity between these groups, their geographical closeness to one another, and how difficult it is to understand their divisions from the outside prompts one Jewish scholar to say that the best modern analogy to Jew-Samaritan relations she can come up with is today's Jewish-Palestinian situation. The facts don't match up between these two scenarios, but the feelings involved come pretty darn close.

And as with anything involving a lot of feeling, this part of the story, the big reveal surrounding the Samaritan, is where people get stuck. You can imagine that the group gathered around Jesus when he told this parable, folks who experienced things ranging from ambivalence to hatred toward Samaritans, would have been stunned to hear Jesus' words, and many of them probably stopped right there: no hearts softened; no greater understanding gained; no minds changed. The lawyer shows us as much when he won't even bring himself to answer Jesus' question, "Who was a neighbor to the man?" by saying, "The Samaritan." Instead, in a lawyerish way, he describes the characteristics of the third protagonist: "The one who showed him mercy." Clearly, no well-established human prejudice has been uprooted here.

But to be fair, uprooting prejudice was probably not Jesus' aim—or, at least, not his only aim. And this is where we, too, may get a little stuck. Contemporary hearers of The Good Samaritan, just like Jesus' first hearers, care a lot about the identity of the third protagonist. We've even named the parable after him! Except for us, it's not because we can't handle Samaritans. Instead, it's because many people in our churches are, rightly, ultra-aware of hatred as major category of sinfulness and we recognize that animosity between groups of people are one of its vilest manifestations. We live "post" a lot of terrible instances of "othering," which are enshrined in living memory: violence against Jews in Nazi Germany; violence against Black Americans in what we call the era of Civil Rights; violence against the LGBT community, exemplified in raids and bullying and hate crimes. You can think of many more examples. When we imagine the Samaritan coming down the road, we don't flinch. We celebrate the idea that Jesus has leveled the moral playing field; that someone who doesn't look like us or live like us could show us how to act right; and often the challenge we take away from this parable involves discerning how our own prejudices, our own "Samaritans" keep us from being the sort of neighbors Jesus wants us to be. When we ask ourselves that question, this story can unsettle us, too, just like it did for the

crowd gathered around the lawyer and Jesus, waiting for the righteous fellow, just like them, to show up and do something good.

This is a just reading of the parable. This is a worthy beginning. But it doesn't take us all the way down the road. And that's because underlying the surprise of the Samaritan—the surprise that stops Jesus' first hearers in their tracks and consumes his contemporary hearers with worthwhile concern—underlying that surprise, is an even more radical surprise. And it may be something that the people gathered around Jesus today picked up on quite easily. The language Jesus uses to describe the actions of the Samaritan is formulaic, and strategic. First, and most importantly, there is the attitude of the Samaritan toward the man on the road. He had compassion on him. He showed him mercy. In Scripture, these words are used to describe how God responds to *us*. In almost no other context do they occur from human to human. And then, consider again how the Samaritan responds to the man: he sees the man on the road; once more, he has pity for him, he feels compassion; and he draws near to him. Whose characteristic pattern do we recognize in these actions? What do *we* find *there*? This is how Jesus comes to us, every time he heals someone or calls someone to follow him: he sees us; he loves us; he draws close to us. For Jesus, the Samaritan is not a narrative tool he uses either to leverage his audience's prejudices or to dislodge them. The Samaritan *is him*. Jesus self-identifies, in this parable, with the Samaritan, the outsider who sees human suffering, is affected by it, and draws near to heal it.

Does this change anything about the story, substantially, to learn that the Samaritan is a Christ figure? Does this mean anything new for Jesus' first hearers, and for us? We've already noted that the men and women gathered around Jesus were surprised, shocked, and disoriented by his parable. They are trying, like all those who surround Jesus in his ministry—like all of us—to figure out who this teacher is. That is why the lawyer is questioning him in the first place! And what we learn him with this parable is that, like a prophet, Jesus has no predictable allegiances. We can tell our own stories: a priest will act like this; a Levite will act like that; the very best people will do these things. But Jesus is saying to us that we can't predict what God will do. Or, more accurately, *we can't decide* what God will do. *We can't determine* it. Because Jesus actually *is* giving us a way to understand God here. Specifically, he is revealing where God is. God, as Samaritan, has gone over to the other side. God has gone over in Christ, seeing and feeling and coming close to us in Incarnation. God has gone over to the enemy, into things and people that offend us, which is surely part of what provokes Jesus' contemporaries about his encounters with Gentiles and Samaritans and suspicious-seeming Jews. And I think that Jesus is trying to tell us here that our offense will only grow stronger and stronger as his story continues. For Jesus is not only revealing to us where God is—he is foreshadowing where God will be. God, in Christ, is about to go over to the other side of Life. God is about to go over into persecution. He is about to go over into Death. “So don't be confused about me,” Jesus seems to be saying with this parable. “Your Teacher is about to become your Samaritan. In fact, when my journey is ended, I will be more difficult for you than a Samaritan. I will be the man lying on the side of the road. I will be the victim. And then, who will you be? A passerby? Or a compassionate, merciful friend?”

It is the brilliance of the parable that Jesus can play these roles—both savior and victim. And it is where we find our hope and our Gospel in the story of the Good Samaritan: in the fullness of Christ, who aligns himself with us in our suffering *and* calls us to pattern ourselves after him in his strength. “Go and do likewise,” after all, are his parting words to the lawyer and the crowd.

And where neighborliness is a major concern for faith, where we are rightly motivated to identify our own enmities and offer them up for transformation, this parable is very good news. For the surprise of our time is the discovery that we don't like post-*anything*. Not post-ethnic and religious violence and genocide; not post-racial injustice; not post-violence against LGBT communities—or post-indignities perpetrated against *anyone*. Any Samaritan or any person just traveling along the road. We need the God of the Good Samaritan, who can be anywhere, with anyone, at any time. We need Jesus to be interceding for us and for the other, eternally. And we need what God has given us in Christ: the Samaritan, the injured man, *and* the *priest* that his people have always needed, offering the sacrifice of his life for us and with us.