

The Pilgrim Way: Neighboring Along the Way

Luke 10:15-37

I don't know if any of you give up something for Lent, but it seems like we are giving up Lent for Lent! At least in corporate worship. However, in our individual quiet moments of prayer and reflection during this Lenten season, I hope you are making time to reflect on God's great love for you, and Jesus' life and his sacrifice on your behalf, and on behalf of the world.

During this time of global struggle, we might even say global suffering, I especially appreciate that Jesus is referred to as the Suffering Servant (that name and concept comes from Isaiah 53:1-6; which is one of the readings for Holy Week). Friends, know that Jesus, the suffering servant, is with you, and with everyone, during this global pandemic.

During this sermon series on the Pilgrim Way my intent was to talk today about the need for friends and companions and fellow sojourners, who walk the pilgrim journey together for shared experiences and mutual encouragement. And while that is true, and needed, I have adjusted the message today for our socially distanced, or perhaps even isolated lives that we are living during this part of the Pilgrim journey.

So, I will be talking about being fellow pilgrims, but from a different perspective, as we reflect on a familiar parable.

While Jesus and his followers are on the road toward Jerusalem, someone along the way stops him to ask a question, and Jesus responds with a roadway parable.

Luke 10: 25-37

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "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?"

Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with compassion. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' 'Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'"

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

In reading and studying this passage in preparation for today's message, I had to chuckle a bit initially, because in light of the coronavirus the Samaritan, who is intended to be the good example for us in this parable, is a bad example of social distancing! And the two unsympathetic priests who walk around on the other side of the road reflect appropriate social distancing. But obviously this story is not about a person who is infected with coronavirus, lying by the side of the road. He got beat up and robbed! Anyway, on the surface I thought that was kind of funny.

Jesus, rather, tells a parable that shows an example of how the opposite of social distancing is needed, in most cases, most of the time, when there is a person in need. And yet, here is a good question for us during *this* time: what does it mean to be neighborly people while we shelter in place and maintain social distancing? There are a couple of poignant parts of this story that address that question today.

I wonder how many of us have gotten to know our literal, near-door neighbors better these past few weeks. Perhaps you've greeted neighbors as you've been out for a walk. And a lot of people are out walking these days. Heidi

and I have gone for a lot of walks lately and have greeted a lot of other walkers, many of them with their dogs. There have never been so many happy dogs!

We've all been wondering what will be different after this storm of coronavirus passes over. We know that a massive shift is taking place and several things will be different. The world won't be the same; our country won't be the same. Maybe you won't be the same.

And perhaps—hopefully—one of those differences will be that people across the country will become more neighborly; will take the time to talk to each other more, and share their lives with each other more, and recognize and appreciate our common humanity more—with each other *and* with people across the world.

The irony of this time is that our isolation may actually result in a greater sense of community and neighborliness. We're like caterpillars, cocooning, waiting to emerge as a flock of beautiful butterflies, at the right time. There's a nice Easter image for you!—a good springtime image. That's why it's important to pay attention to what we're learning about ourselves during this time, and what God is growing in us and teaching us.

Neighboring is what this conversation, and the subsequent story, is all about, from Luke's gospel. As this lawyer hears Jesus reiterate the two greatest commandments (to love God with everything you've got, and love your neighbor as yourself), he asks a boundary question in reply: "*And who is my neighbor?* In other words, "Who am I *obligated* to love?" "Who do I **have** to love, and who do I **not** have to love?" He's asking about obligations and boundaries and borders: Who's on my *to-love* list, and who doesn't *have to be* on it. (pause)

Who *is* my neighbor? In spite of this lawyer's motives (Luke tells us that he was trying to justify himself), that is a good question for me, and for you. Who is *your* neighbor? Do you have a mental list of who's on it and who isn't? Let's let that question sit and marinate in our consciousness for a moment.

The lawyer asked Jesus, "*Who is my neighbor? Who am I obligated to love? Where is the line, the border between neighbor and not-neighbor?*" Let me tell you a story, Jesus replies. "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho." That's 18 miles, all downhill. Jerusalem is 2500 feet above sea level, and Jericho is 800 feet *below* sea level, near the Dead Sea. So over the course of about 18 miles, you go down some 3300 feet. To put it in Washington state terms, you go down a

winding road from the top of Snoqualmie Pass to North Bend. And that winding road (from J to J) was well-known as a perfect place for thieves and robbers.

In fact, for centuries, it was feared as a place of frequent crimes, marauding bands of criminals and violence. If you travelled that road, you only went in broad daylight, and only with another person or with a group.

But the man in the story is alone. And suddenly in this dangerous place, it happens. Out of nowhere, robbers come, take his things, beat him to unconsciousness, strip his clothes off, and disappear. And he is left, lying there by the side of the road. This is great drama. And great storytelling.

Kenneth Bailey is a scholar who lived in the Middle East for most of his career, taught at a University in Beirut, Lebanon, and has written helpful volumes about the culture there and how to interpret the Bible in light of that culture. He describes this area in the time of Jesus as an amazing mix of ethnic & religious communities, intermingled and complicated. And so a traveler identified strangers on the road in one of two ways:

- By their *speech* - There were a dozen major languages, and any number of minor ones, but a person's dialect could be pretty easily identified. For example, in Matt.26 Peter is identified as a Galilean: when he denies

knowing Christ, someone who hears him speaking says, “we can tell by your accent” that you were one of his Galilean followers.

- By their *clothing* - The difference between Jewish and non-Jewish dress was instantly identifiable, even down to differences from village to village.

But this man who fell to robbers in the story was “stripped, beaten, and left half-dead.” It’s a brilliant aspect of the story, because it begs the question: Who is he? Where is he from? He can’t talk, nor does he have clothes that identify him. So, is he one of us? Is he one of ‘them’? *Who is he??* The answer is: He is a human being, in great need. He is any person—or every person—in need.

That is his most basic identity. A human being—any person, or every person—in need. Now, the rest of the story is about how two priests ignore him and each walks by on the other side, and how finally a Samaritan, a person despised by the Jews, stops to help the guy by doing some basic things that will help him recover. And how Jesus then issues the command to go and do likewise. Be a good Samaritan. Be a good neighbor; act in neighborly ways by helping those in need.

But I want us to back up and take a moment to ponder the mind and heart of the Samaritan, in particular the human connection that he obviously felt, and how this relates to ourselves and our world right now.

I'd like us to dwell on these three short phrases in verse 33: he came near; he saw him; he was moved with compassion. He came near. He saw him. He was moved with compassion. Before he *did* anything, he stopped himself to approach this person. Then he took the time to see and understand his condition. And as a result, he was moved in his gut. The word "compassion" in Greek is, literally, "guts"—the Greek word is pronounced "splagna" which kind of sounds like guts; intestines, entrails; you get the picture! He was moved, inwardly, with compassion.

It is so important for us not to miss this part of the story. Jesus didn't have the Samaritan swiftly go from walking to helping to going on his way. This little verse, verse 33, tells us that there was something that happened internally for the Samaritan that caused him to realize a human connection. He came near; he *saw* him—there are two words that mean "to see" in Greek: one refers to basic eyesight; the other to observing, and understanding, and looking more deeply into something or someone. Like when someone says, "I see you, sister" it means I understand you—I get you. Or when someone explains and clarifies something for you, and you say, "Oh, I see." That's the word that's used here. The Samaritan *SAW* him; not just with his eyesight but with his awareness, with understanding, with depth. And it moved him in his gut.

The priests cared primarily about religious purity and borders and differences as they passed along on the other side of the road. The Samaritan took time to understand this person's condition, and let himself be moved, Jesus tells us, therefore putting the human connection and solidarity *first; as primary*—perhaps, even as an *expression* of his religion or spirituality or whatever we want to call it.

Because Samaritans were religious too, just as much as the Jews were. The word “religion” literally means to “re-ligament.” It’s a beautiful word, and it signifies spiritual surgery, if you will, reconnecting human relationship with God, and human relationships one to another. So this parable is easily read as an example of *bad religion* at work and *good religion* at work. Bad religion being the act of differentiating and distancing and separating, (actually *not* re-ligamenting), and good religion as an act of drawing near, connecting, and joining. Healing. The true purpose of religion.

By telling the story this way, with these characters, Jesus erases issues of difference and questions about borders, and invites his hearers and followers to BE a certain type of person who really sees others as persons, regardless of who they are, or where they have come from, or what their condition is.

We'll get to the *doing* again once we emerge from our stay at home lives. But for now, we have the opportunity to *see* others, to *draw near* to others in our hearts and minds, and *be moved*. And to pray!

Or... let's reframe this. Perhaps our seeing and understanding and drawing near in our hearts and minds **IS** the doing right now—as we order or reorder our lives while staying home, to practice neighborliness through our use of time and energy to see and understand others, here and around the world. It's the pre-doing doing that is preparing us to go out with a renewed heart of compassion. To practice true religion.

As we've been living with this pandemic—and it looks like we're going to be living with it for a while longer—it has struck me, as it has probably struck you, how much this has created a global solidarity like never before. We are all in this together, worldwide. As one of my online daily devotionals put it a couple days ago, if God wanted us to experience global solidarity, there could not have been a better way. Not that God *causes* suffering; but because God *uses* suffering, and all things, to bring forth good.

Think of it, every human being on earth right now has access to the same suffering. Every person. We all have access to it, and it bypasses race, nation,

religion, political ideology, gender, and ethnicity. Covid 19 doesn't care about any of those things. It only wants a human host. And we are all human beings, across the world. That is our basic identity.

We are in the midst of a highly teachable moment—a moment that is lasting longer than we like, but still... here is our teachable moment. There's no doubt that this period will be referred to for the rest of our lifetimes, and beyond. And so we have a chance to go deep, and to go broad. Because globally, we're in this together. Connection and depth are being forced on us by suffering of various kinds (physical, economic, psychological and emotional), by all people around the world. And suffering is meant to lead to love and compassion.

But for God to reach us and teach us, we have to allow suffering to affect us. Real solidarity needs to be felt. That's the true meaning of the word "compassion" in English: to "suffer with" (co-passio) – to allow someone else's pain to influence us in a real way. The opportunity presented to us is to move beyond our own personal opinions and circumstances and our reflexive views of others—our borders if you will—and take in the whole, the entirety, of what is going on, in order to see, not differences but commonalities.

This, I must say, is one of the gifts of television right now: we can turn it on and see how people in countries around the world are hurting. And in addition to the highly populated areas that are being greatly affected, we can ask, what is going to happen to those living in isolated places, or for those who don't have health care? Imagine the fragility of the most marginalized, of people in prisons, the homeless, and even the people performing necessary services, such as ambulance drivers, nurses, and doctors, risking their lives to save lives keep society together right now?

And we have to allow these feelings to come, in our gut, and invite God's presence to hold and sustain us in a time of collective prayer and reaching out with our hearts and minds in understanding. Really seeing people.

We may not be able to physically do what the good Samaritan did in helping someone right now, during our sheltering in place, but we can each take steps toward becoming the neighbor that Jesus teaches us to become by taking time to learn about people from other parts of the world, and feel the human connection, the way the Samaritan felt this compassion, this human connection. Can we take time to do that? To picture our sisters and brothers in Italy, South Korea, Iran, Spain; in Texas, and New York. Can you see them? What do you have in common

with them? What gifts do they give to the world? How do they enrich humanity? How do they enrich you, and me? What are their longings? What better way for Christians to engage the commandment to love their neighbor as themselves than to learn what those neighbors hold dear, and what they bring to the world.

One last takeaway from the story: I mentioned that Jesus is erasing issues of differences and border questions with this story. By using these particular characters—an everyperson, two priests, and a Samaritan—Jesus has jarred his listeners; he has startled them awake, into an awareness of how *God* sees people.

Because, Jews and Samaritans hated each other. There is a lot of history and backstory there and you can read about it by doing a simple search online. And, there are encounters in the gospel where Jesus talks with Samaritan people in public and affirms them and helps them, which leads to his being harassed and hated by the religious leaders. For example, when the Pharisees wanted to insult Jesus and accuse him, in John 8:48, they said, “*Aren’t we right in saying you’re a Samaritan and **therefore** you have a demon?*” Jews considered Samaritans accursed and unclean.

Therefore, Jesus’ listeners—his Jewish audience—would have been offended that a Samaritan is made the hero of the story, and that they are told to

go and be like a Samaritan. This would be like Jesus, in Israel today, telling a story about the good Palestinian. Or during the Civil War, appearing in the north and telling the story of the good Confederate. Or, in the south, the good Yankee.

Jesus is creating a religious and cultural earthquake with this story. We are supposed to note the shocking element. And part of the shock here is that God doesn't have an insider-outsider mentality, or a hierarchy of who is more important or worthy. God doesn't draw lines like that, or sort people like that.

The shock is that God's love is for all, and, that *anyone* can be used by God to do good, and... that even a despised outsider—people thought of as heartless and less than human—can have the heart of compassion and see other human beings as human beings and practice true religion. In a way, Jesus humanized the Samaritan. Even as the Samaritan humanized the person who was left by the side of the road.

And the shock is that Jesus didn't see Samaritans as despised outsiders the way he was supposed to. He didn't abide by tribal code and norms. He saw human beings as human beings. Period. And at the end of the story when he asks the lawyer "Who was a neighbor to that person?" what he is really asking is, "Who was seeing clearly here?"

Again, this time, this extended moment of social distancing, is an opportunity to see, really see, our fellow human beings and allow ourselves to be moved with compassion. Because... that's how Jesus sees people. In the gospel accounts, whether it was a Roman centurion, or a Syro-Phoenician woman, a Samaritan leper, or a wealthy tax collector, whether a 12-year-old girl, or a hostile Judean, there was no one who was dismissed from Jesus' heart of compassion. He *saw* them. And that's how he sees you, really sees you ("I get you!" Jesus says), and that's how he sees your near-door neighbor, and your neighbor and your neighbors across the world.

Jesus made no friends that day when he told this story, but he sacrificed his personal reputation, and his security, in order to break down barriers that divide—false barriers that separate human beings, that create torn ACL's and rotator cuffs, so to speak. He sacrificed those things to bring true religion—to *re-ligament* human relationship with God, and re-ligament relationship between people.

Could there be a better way for us to practice *our* religion than to see, not differences but commonalities, and express our love and compassion, along with Jesus, and thus become true neighbors.