

Proper 10, Year C
July 11, 2010
St. Michael and All Angels, Portland
The Rev. Deacon Gabriel Lamazares

Amos 7:7-17 and Psalm 82 • Colossians 1:1-14 • Luke 10:25-37

OK, show of hands.

Who has just heard the story of the Good Samaritan for the first time?
(I knew it! Nobody.)

Who has heard this story so many times he or she could probably repeat a pretty faithful version of it by heart?

Who thinks this story illustrates the moral principle of altruism, of doing for others without regard to self?

Good! You're not wrong. It is certainly about altruism, in part.

Who feels a little (or a lot) guilty when you hear the story of the Good Samaritan?

I know I do. It's easy to use the story as an example of all the ways we fail to help the many around us who are in need. I have certainly said 'no' or walked by a person in need many times in my life. I suspect you have, too.

But there's another way to use this story, as a beacon instead of a stick, as a flashlight instead of a mirror. Let's give it a try.

But first: I've got something to show you.

Who thinks the Good Samaritan is a factual retelling of a historical event?

It's not that, is it? It's a story, conceived and told for a reason, to illustrate a point. So every detail is significant.

Try this story on and see what you think:

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 another man who lived near him was going down that road;

and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. But a stranger from another region while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. 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 two, 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."

Jesus was a master debater, teacher, and story-teller. **If altruism were the only point of the Good Samaritan, could Jesus not have told this story instead?** If the point to be illustrated were simply that loving your neighbor means having compassion for anyone who is in trouble-- rather than just the person who lives near you, or who you know, or who you see every day--could Jesus not have simply told the story I just read?

But that was not the story that Jesus told.

I would submit for your consideration that the key to understanding the story of the Good Samaritan is not the 'Good' but the 'Samaritan.'

Remember that Samaritans were despised and disdained by proper Jews. Samaritans were Gentiles pretending to be Jews, apostates, heretics, not just ignorant of the covenant, but defiling it with their worship of God at Mt. Gerizim instead of Mt. Zion. They were sell-outs and half-breeds, collaborators with the armies and empires that overran the kingdoms of Israel and Judah.

The meaning of the story is political as well as personal. It's about our in-groups and out-groups, about our most deeply ingrained hatreds and prejudices, about mistrust and violence between all kinds of factions, about 'us' and 'them.' Most of all, it's about the danger of taking refuge in our identities, hoping that our membership in a group will make us heirs to eternal life.

The priest and the Levite who pass by are not just us, but those who we put on a pedestal, who we want to embody our highest ideals of how good we are. They are 'us' to the second and tenth power. The Samaritan is everyone we disdain and reject, everyone we roll our eyes at when we turn away, everyone we put in the category of 'what's wrong with the world.' And it is just that person whom Jesus has us look to as a model.

So here's a light-hearted retelling of the story that might help us to hear it afresh:

A Democratic party officer was going to the eastern part of the state to do some organizing, and far from the interstate, the temperature gauge on his dashboard cranked to hot and steam started pouring out from under his hood before the car came to a halt. Of course, there was no cell phone coverage. What to do but stand by the side of the road and wait for help?

Now by chance President Obama was giving a speech in that part of the state that day, about the economy and how it's getting better, and his cavalcade rode by. But they didn't stop. They saw the guy on the side of the road but had a fundraising stop to make, so they left it to someone else. So likewise a representative drove by in his Prius with his legislative license plate and an Obama sticker and all kinds of bumper stickers about green energy and living simply and health care for everyone, but the representative didn't stop either.

Then a big Yukon came driving down the road and pulled up in front of the broken-down car. When our organizer saw that it had bumper stickers ranging from "Where's the birth certificate?!" to the Tea Party to the NRA, a note of fear arose. Did they have a gun rack? The driver stepped out, went to him and offered to take him to the nearest gas station. When they got there, he knew the guys at the garage and persuaded them to tow the car for free and get it going again on his dime. Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the organizer whose car broke down in the middle of nowhere?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy."

So, yes, the story is about altruism. But it is not saying that compassion is a good idea, part of being a good person, a nice person.

It is saying that when it comes to eternal life and living right and turning towards God, *costly compassionate action is what matters*. Our identities and affiliations, our membership cards and certificates, our pedigrees, diplomas, degrees, test results, accents, languages, skin color, gender, tribe, denomination, religion or lack of it will not help us; in fact, it's more likely to get in our way, to lull us into complacency, to make it OK to ignore what's happening outside the safe borders of our group.

It is when we recognize the pain and suffering of people who are very different from us and reach out to help that we are fulfilling the law. Or even better, when we know we're half-dead in a ditch, a goner for sure, and someone we would never have invited to our dinner parties steps out of the shadows, comes down into the ditch with us, and gives us a hand.

When we allow ourselves to be carried by the steady current of simple compassion, giver and receiver become an icon, a transparent window through which God's love for creation in Christ can be seen.

Though my story is a light reflection, it points towards what Jesus was getting at. And there are real heart-breaking examples of this kind of compassion in the world that bring home the cost and the promise of compassion: Palestinians helping wounded Israelis, Gentiles hiding Jews during the Holocaust, Serbs helping Bosnian Muslims survive the ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia. And those are the ones we hear about. I'm sure there are a million examples no one will ever know about, that are hidden only in the heart of God.

As we gather over this year to celebrate one hundred years of St. Michael and All Angels' witness in Hollywood, let us give thanks for the numberless ways in which this community has reached out to people beyond our walls and social circles with simple compassion. That reaching out has cost us, transformed us, and molded us into a community no one could have imagined in 1910, when Halley's Comet appeared in the sky. We worship in two languages and welcome all kinds of people and households among us. And we're not done yet! Not by a long shot.

So let's take a moment to pay attention to the place within us where compassion bubbles up like a spring, connecting the most unlikely people. It is there that the Spirit will draw us on, beyond our fears and labels and imaginings, towards our place as a sign of the Reign of God.

Pay attention to the movement of compassion and follow it, no matter what it costs. Do this, and you will live.

Amen.