

Innkeepers in Dangerous Times

The Rev. Geoff Parker to Foreside Community Church - Falmouth, ME

Monday, July 8, 2019

Scripture: [Luke 10:25–37](#)

Introduction to the Scripture

Every now and then, you get to take a swing at a greatest hit of scripture. Today we hear the parable we call the story of the “Good Samaritan.”

At the beginning of the story is Jesus’s calling out of the “greatest commandment”, which if you get interested in these sorts of things is also the purpose statement of our national United Church of Christ: *To love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength and our neighbor as ourselves.* The story of this unexpected act of compassion underlines the answer to the question: who then, is our neighbor?

We most often follow Jesus and his young interrogator and try to project ourselves as the compassionate traveler who reaches out... but there are many characters in this story.

It is sometimes a useful way to spend time with scripture to read through narratives, and each time try and find ourselves in the place of new and different characters, because in a complex story... and Jesus didn’t often tell simple ones... each character invites you into a new exploration of what humans do and who we are.

So as the characters go by here... try to spot them, and imagine yourself in their shoes as well.

Sermon

So, who did you notice in the story Jesus tells? Who did you find yourself sitting with?

Were you the priest or the scribe? Have you ever found yourself bound by the strictures of who you are supposed to be in society? I think that's their story... violence and pain are disorienting and frightening, and confronted by the pain of the victim by the side of the road... they try to keep themselves pure from it, they cross to the other side... in some apocryphal versions of the parable the priest says a prayer as he goes by, the scribe perhaps writes one.

We've all been taught who we're supposed to relate to in Jesus's story here, right? We're supposed to be these good Samaritans, people who reach across the borders and boundaries to offer healing to people who have been beaten and cast out. The Good Samaritan isn't a person who we spend a lot of time with thinking about what came before. He seems to be filled both in Spirit and in life.

Some years ago I was shown an allegorical teaching of St. Augustine of Hippo about this story which we call the Good Samaritan now. As I did before the reading, he invites the reader to imagine different roles in the story being lived out. Augustine is uninterested in the interpretation that we live in the most... an allegorical invitation to be surprising sources of compassion like the Samaritan traveler. For Augustine, the Good Samaritan is so Good, he can only be a stand in for Jesus. Indeed, the caring action here fits with a theme of Jesus's ministry reaching out for those who shouldn't be. Both Samaritans and Jews would have viewed physical contact with the other as unclean... so when this traveler picks up the beaten man, both transcend the stigmas of their cultures.

This exactly mirrors lepers who have been cast out, and yet are touched and reconnected to community by Jesus, healing comes through a surprising crossing of taboos to show compassion. Augustine is sure the Samaritan is Jesus.

So, who are we? Maybe as individuals, and as this gathered people? Augustine has a different role for us. We are the Inn-Keeper. The church, this big ol' hotel right here, exists to be a place of directing and connecting the gifts of healing and compassion to the broken and hurting places.

The Samaritan hands the Inn-Keeper two denarii, and then says...

“Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.”

See, each of us, all of us... we have these gifts... richness of life in skills, and callings, and possessions. If we are honest with ourselves, we have to recognize that they are simply part of God’s abundance in the whole world that has been—for this moment—shared with us. And we are invited to graciously share them with the world. And the blessings keep coming back to us. You’ll notice, really, the inn-keeper doesn’t have a job to do here but be an innkeeper. It’s his or her part in the play, that’s all.

I think in these days, we who have for long periods of time had access to power and privilege that allows to make sweeping changes to our surroundings need the reminder and invitation to be innkeepers. There’s a version of this story I hear a little too often these days in which the Samaritan brings the wounded man into the inn and recounts the story of what has happened.

“That’s horrible! Shouts the inn-keeper, shocked by the tale. ”Lucky for you,“ he says, ”I’m on the village council of elders. I’ve been saying something needs to be done about the crime on the roads for years now! We’ll get a task force together in no time now. Just come with me, and we’ll connect you with our security and economic development scribes...” and he grabs the baffled Samaritan by the arm and hurries him into the center of town... leaving the bleeding man on the floor of the inn... alone.

I love working for systemic justice and compassion and wholeness, friends. If I were to look for signs of the times for how to seek more wholeness on all the paths and roads of life: I would note our country has left the United Nations Human Rights Council^[1], a complicated and messy thing no doubt, but less without us there... I would note that our General Synod spoke clearly in Milwaukee about the state of forced migration in the world, and calls us to work to comply with the United Nations Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration^[2]... I would note that we have systemic theology to do: the Pew Center announced this week polling: the only Christian groups in America that do not have a majority belief that we have a responsibility to refugees? White Mainline and Evangelicals. ^[3]

I long for us to be a part of God’s transformation of the whole world... but let’s not ever let it blind us to the wounded soul right in front of us, or sometimes within us. Don’t overcomplicate

We like to make it complicated. I think that's some of how Jesus gets into this story. The young lawyer (or scribe) who asks him what he must do is an expert in the law of Moses, but it's clear from the ways he asks his questions, he's hoping to use his expertise to complicate this moral commandment beyond any actual responsibility. "Love God with all my heart, soul, mind..." Easy to do... or at least hard for you to check. "Love your neighbor..." Well, that gets awfully complicated, Jesus. Have you even thought about my neighbors immigration status? What wild and crazy religion they might practice?

Don't overcomplicate. Instead, simply do as another ancient, St. Benedict, offers... "Listen with the ear of the heart," he instructs. And, "All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ, for he himself will say: I was a stranger and you welcomed me." I gave you gifts and brought you the wounded. Use them for healing.

Just remember, all of us are inn-keepers for each other... so I give thanks for the ways you nurture the gifts of others, but I challenge you to be so bold as to discover your own gifts, and then to *ask us to support you in them*. Because this is where I say we need more than just our financial gifts to be a alive and thriving church. Because we are in a time when we will need everyone's gifts to be active and engaged... As St. Howard Thurman said: "Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive."

So you, people of God, claim those gifts which Christ has given you... given you that you might give them away here... at the hotel between towns where all God's beloved and wounded children are welcomed to rest and heal.

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1. [Administration Withdraws U.S. from U.N. Human Rights Council](#) ↩
 2. [Resolution 3, 32nd Synod of the United Church of Christ, 2019](#) ↩
 3. [Data from Pew Research - July 7, 2019](#) ↩