

Pentecost 7

July 15, 2007

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The parable we just heard read, the parable of the Good Samaritan, is perhaps the most familiar of all the parables Jesus told. We often miss an important part of the telling of this story that is the frame story in which Luke sets the telling of the parable. The frame story gives meaning, it surrounds the story like a frame around a picture that draws our attention to that which is within the frame.

Luke tells us that a lawyer stands up and begins to question Jesus. Luke describes this as testing Jesus but I like to think the man wanted to engage Jesus in a give and take dialogue about something that bothered him. "Rabbi, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Like any good rabbi engaging in a debate about religious law Jesus responds with a question, "What is written in the law?"

The lawyer quite proudly, I assume, answers "The law can easily be boiled down to two points. In Deuteronomy, we read that one is to love God with all their heart, all their soul, and all their might. In Leviticus, we read that we are to love our neighbor as we love ourselves."

Jesus' reply must have deflated the lawyer. "You have given the right answer, do this and you will live." Perhaps the lawyer heard in Jesus' response an accusation that he was not following the law. His feathers seem a bit ruffled as he responds to Jesus, "And just who is my neighbor?"

The lawyer most likely thought Jesus would answer with a question and the rabbinic tradition of a question leading to a deeper question would go on. Instead Jesus answers with a story. It is a story that really answers the lawyer's first question. Note the lawyer did not ask Jesus, "What must I believe?" or "what must I think?" he asked, "What must I do?" Then he turns to ideas "Who is my neighbor?" and Jesus returns to "What must I do?" Jesus moves from ideas to reality, to action, to how one is to live.

So Jesus tells a story. It is the story of a man who travels from Jericho to Jerusalem He falls among robbers who beat him. Two people we would expect to help him walk by on the other side of the road. The one least likely to help him stops and offers generous assistance. We all know the story well and have

heard it explained in a variety of ways all intended to encourage us to think about our neighbor in the broad of terms.

I want to tell you a story that shines a different light on the parable. The story is from Burma and it is entitled *The Good Samaritan Stone*.

Long ago there was a small village in the jungles of Burma. It was a very nice, tidy village of just ordinary folks. They were not rich but they were not poor and they were blessed with a very wise Mayor.

One day a traveler came down the road that passed through the village. The sun was setting and he was very tired. So he decided it was best to sleep by the road and engage the villagers in the morning when he felt better. Taking his coin purse from around his neck, he hid the purse under a stone so he could not be robbed while he slept. But a villager saw him hide the purse. Quietly, late at night, he slipped the coin purse from under the stone and ran off.

In the morning the traveler awoke, he stretched and yawned still sleepy he walked over to the stone. Pushing the stone over he reached for his purse. It was gone! His purse had been stolen.

The traveler collapsed to the ground and began to weep. Two women from the village came by on the way to fetch water from the river, they heard the man cry, "All my money is gone, every penny."

Then a fisherman walked by on the other side hearing the traveler moan, "Now I have no money to buy food for my children." And so it was until a crowd of people began to gather on the roadside curious about the traveler. Someone summoned the Mayor. The Mayor asked the traveler what had happened. With tear filled sobs the traveler explained his plight and pointed out the stone.

The Mayor turned to two strong men, "Arrest the stone. Bring the thief to the village square." The villagers were surprised by the Mayor's command. They followed along to the square to see what would happen next. The Mayor called the village elders to assume their places for a trial of the stone that stole the man's purse. The Mayor was silent for a long time as he paced around and around the stone. "What is your name?" he asked. The stone was silent. "Where are you from?" More silence. "Well tell me your age?"

Now the villagers were beginning to look at each other. Everywhere there were smiles and puzzled looks. No one said a word. The Mayor continued to walk around the stone. "So, you won't talk?" Some of the villagers chuckled. "So why were you loitering outside our village? Were you looking for trouble?" Some of the villagers laughed. "This is a court of law. Show some respect. Stop laughing." said the Mayor.

The Mayor turned back to the stone. He shouted at the stone, "You stole money and you know it, admit your guilt." The stone said nothing and the villagers could no longer control their laughter. Some put their hands over their mouth to stifle their chuckle. "I hold you in contempt of court. In punishment you will receive 30 lashes." A man gave out a big belly laugh and everyone joined in. The Mayor waited for the laughter to die down, then quietly but firmly he spoke, "Have you no respect for this court? I fine every one of you, except the children who imitated their elders, one coin a piece."

The Mayor returned to his place among the elders and had a bowl placed at his feet. Every adult from the village dropped a coin in the bowl. The Mayor picked up the bowl and handed it to the traveler. The traveler's eyes were now filled with tears of gratitude. The Mayor ordered the stone to be put back beside the road. The people of the village talked about the trial for a long time. Was the Mayor foolish or did he act with wisdom? The stone is still there. It stands as a reminder that there is no such thing as an innocent bystander.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is not a nice, easy, comfortable story to live with. The lawyer's question "Who is my neighbor?" asks to whom do I have an obligation? Jesus tells us that even those we fear, those different than we are, those we have been taught to hate are our neighbors. The answer to the question is that neighborly love costs. It costs time, it costs money, it costs effort, it costs comfort and it may cost rejection. I am sure we, like the lawyer, in the parable like to think of ourselves as the good people who do what is right. The parable challenges us to look again carefully and with a healthy sense of humility. Like the villagers we know we cannot be solitary Samaritans. We are called to be a village of Good Samaritans reaching out in genuine compassionate care for others.

And Jesus said, "Go and do likewise."

