

Sermon preached at St. John's Episcopal Church, West Hartford, CT

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Proper 10, Year C

"A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho." So begins the familiar parable that is the heart of this morning's Gospel. Immediately we hear how the man was set upon by thieves who strip him of his clothing (and, we assume, everything else), beat him up and leave him for dead by the side of the road. A priest and then a Levite happen to pass by, but they cross to the other side of the road and hurry on their way. However, when a stranger from Samaria comes along he behaves altogether differently. The Samaritan has compassion on the victim, gives all the on-the-spot first aid that he can, then carries the injured man off to the nearest inn and provides generously for his full recuperation.

It strikes me that those words "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho" and all stories that speak of journeys are, on the deepest level, metaphors for the venture of life. Life is a venture into the unknown, a venture fraught with hazards. Chances are, we will never be attacked by a band of robbers, but there will inevitably be other unexpected perils with which we will have to contend. What will be our response? The characters in Jesus' parable give us three possibilities.

The first possibility is to be a victim like the first traveler that we meet in the parable. The picture of the man lying by the side of the road broken and bleeding reminds me of people I have known who have been victims not just in their experience but in their attitude, people who interpreted their whole lives as ruined by circumstances and/or people beyond their control. I knew a woman who lost her job in a downsizing of her department and was afraid ever to work again. She didn't want to take the chance of ever going through that painful experience again. She allowed the rest of her days to be stunted by an event in her past, and she became a victim on the road of life.

Then there is the response to the uncertainties of life's journey that we can see in the behavior of the priest and the Levite. These are the people whose way of coping with life is to play by the rules, play it safe, and always, always to look out for themselves.

Why don't the priest and the Levite stop to help the wounded man? If we asked them, it is unlikely that either of them would say that they simply didn't care. Probably they would justify their behavior with plausible and respectable reasons: "I had to get to the Temple to carry out my duties. Everyone was expecting me. Anyway, I thought the man was already dead and I would make myself ritually unclean by touching a corpse. How was I to know that he was still alive? Besides I wasn't the only one on the road. There were plenty of others with less pressing responsibilities who could have topped to see if there was any help to be given."

If pressed further, the priest and Levite might have admitted something closer to the truth. "You know what the Jericho road is like - thieves around every boulder. Why if I had stopped to see if the man were still alive, they probably would have jumped me and tried to kill me as well. What would have been gained by giving them another victim?" Hurrying on was the only thing a sane and sensible person could do."

The attitude of the priest and Levite is, of course, no stranger to us. We can see it in its most blatant form in those who, especially in cities, pretend not to see the person lying on the sidewalk, assuming the person to be a drunk without considering that they might be having a heart attack. It is an attitude, however, that is also evident whenever we act as if people who are suffering, whether they be at our Mexican border or in Hartford, are beyond our concern.

When the lawyer asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?", Jesus didn't give him a textbook answer. Instead Jesus taught him that everyone has a claim upon our concern, our love, and our care. I once served at a church in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, a parish that had not learned this lesson. The story began one winter evening when a fire broke out in a large factory building and quickly spread to nearby apartments. The fire was so large that we

could see the flames and clouds of smoke from miles away. I called the Senior Warden and asked her what our parish should be doing to respond. Should we open the church to the fire refugees? Have a prayer service? Should we gather blankets and warm clothing, make coffee and serve donuts? "Oh, Reverend," replied the warden, "Don't worry about it. It's not in our part of Pawtucket."

The priest and Levite are with us whenever we shut our eyes and our hearts to our brothers and sisters who are in need. The priest and Levite are also with us whenever we shrink back from taking risks in order to do what is right. Fear and self-centeredness are that attitude's main drives; expediency and prudence are, however, often their disguise.

The third kind of response to life's journey is that of the Samaritan. There is no reason to suppose that he is naïve about the dangers of the Jerusalem-Jericho road; it was well known to be alive with bandits. He is evidently well-provisioned for the needs of his travels. He is knowledgeable about what needs to be done to give first aid to a wounded man. He is pleasantly worldly in his business arrangements with the innkeeper. Yet the Samaritan is above all a person of compassion, courage, and generosity. How different he is from the priest and Levite. They are concerned only for themselves, afraid to risk anything on behalf of another, unwilling to give even a moment of attention. The Samaritan sees the wounded man and goes to his side. Heedless of the dangers of the situation, he does all that he can to alleviate the man's suffering. Then he gives all that is necessary for the man's recovery, regardless of the cost.

How much the world, how much our country, how much the city of Hartford needs people like the Samaritan – capable, intelligent, compassionate, risk-taking women and men who are willing to give liberally of their time and resources to work for the relief of the poor and the oppressed to make this community and beyond a better place for all. Little good is done by the fearful and self-centered, the overly cautious and the stingy. God can do great good, however, through those who will give themselves wholeheartedly, recklessly, and even foolishly for God.

God sent Jesus to teach us this. Where do we see greater compassion, courage and generosity than in Jesus who was willing to face rejection, suffering, and death and to give his life for love of all of us. Jesus makes real, puts flesh on, the love God has for us and wants us to share with one another.

The menu of the Union League Café, a New Haven restaurant where I ate this week told Jesus' parable in another way. The menu's cover had an old French proverb which captures Jesus' call to us. "Without bread, without wine, love is nothing," it said. And this is what Jesus told the lawyer who asked what he had to do to have eternal life. You can have it now, Jesus told him. You can have a glimpse of heaven when you love your neighbor. Love is not just a warm feeling or a sweet thought, he said; love, real love, is made known in action. In other words, "Without bread, without wine, love is nothing."

So go share your bread and wine, visit someone who is lonely, write that note to the old friend, give away vegetables from our community garden, volunteer to serve a meal at Loaves and Fishes. Walk through the world, walk through life faithfully and generously like the Samaritan we call Good.