

Go and Do Likewise - Now  
Presbyterian Church of New Rochelle  
July 10, 2016

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." (Luke 10:37)

Let us begin with the word of prayer:

Creator God, author of all life, open our hearts and minds that we may hear the truth of your Holy Word and be changed by it. Amen.

On Monday as I began my preparation for worship I read the lectionary selections and I'll confess I groaned a bit. The Parable of the Good Samaritan is so well known. It has been pondered by the great thinkers and preached on to great effect both from the pulpit and in the academy. I groaned under the pressure of what I could possibly say that this faithful congregation hadn't read or heard over the years. But as the week progressed and deadly hatred spewed across our front pages I realized I was looking through the wrong end of the telescope. It's not about me finding something new or clever to say about this powerful parable; it's about understanding its relevance in our lives – right now. By Thursday evening it was clear that the lectionary had delivered a gift. As our nation gathers in houses of worship this weekend could there be a more provocative, more important message to hear? And yet I worry given the extreme polarity of our national conversation if our Lord's message will be properly heard for the challenge it lays before us. If you want to inherit eternal life you had better be prepared to show respect and kindness to those who are ignored by the mainstream; you had better be prepared to cross the

road to help those who have been wounded by a system that does not treat each of its citizens equally.

You will recall that Jesus has set his face to go to Jerusalem and as they traveled through a village of Samaritans they were offered no hospitality. John and James, the sons of Zebedee, wanted to nuke them – remember? Their knee jerk response gives us

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a sense of the prevailing sentiment and feels uncomfortably familiar. Continuing toward Jerusalem not long thereafter Jesus was tested by a wily lawyer who was trying to find the shortest route to eternal life. The attorney came well prepared. He had done his research and had a "gotcha" question wanting to "justify himself" as Luke puts it. OK says the attorney, love God and love my neighbor, I get that. But "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus' answer? The Parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus' story reminds us in this time of escalating racial tension that we must not presume to know how a person associated with one group or another will respond in any given situation. We must not presume to know goodness or evil based on external identifiers; there is darkness and light in each one of us.

Our newly elected Stated Clerk, J. Herbert Nelson, a third generation Presbyterian pastor issued a statement last week addressing the tragic and “unjustified killings by law enforcement officers” of two African-American men in Minnesota and Louisiana. He offered a stern analysis to church leaders saying:

“While these police killings are occurring, it is apparent that we remain a denomination that struggles to engage the truth about our own privilege. As church leaders, we find it easy to offer prayers for the families while mentioning a statement in our Sunday morning sermons about the struggles of racism in the US. Yet our depth of commitment to resolve the problem of blatant racism within our own communities is often shallow and meaningless. The Bible reminds us that, “You are from God, little children, and have overcome them, because greater is the one who is in you than the one who is in the world” (1 John 4:4). Our ability to overcome the world by the God-bestowed power within us requires faith and courage.”

How does this Parable relate to street violence and racism? We know the basic parameters of this iconic parable found in all three synoptic Gospels. A traveler was attacked by highwayman and left for dead on the side of the road. Three persons happened along the road not long after, a Priest; a Levite; and a Samaritan. Only one of the three offers help of any kind; the one thought least likely to show compassion: the Samaritan.

Historically, the Samaritans are a tiny splinter group whose history overlaps with Judaism. They believed that Moses received the law on Mount Gerizim (just north of Jerusalem) and not Mount Sinai and that the Torah was the whole of Scripture. When the Assyrians conquered Jerusalem and destroyed the temple the first time, the Samaritans remained behind and often intermarried with the locals. When the Babylonians conquered the Assyrians and encouraged the diaspora to return to Jerusalem the enmity and resentment was not hard to predict or explain. As we noted above, Luke reminds us that within days or weeks that discord had been acted out as Jesus and his disciples traveled through the province of Samaria.

The distinction between priests and Levites is more subtle. Shortly after the Exodus, the tribe of Levi was rewarded with priestly duties because they alone among the 12 tribes stood with Moses and did not join the others in worshipping false idols – remember the golden calf? Aaron, Moses’s brother, was a Levite and regarded as the first priest. To his descendants were given the priestly responsibility of the Temple and the holy of holies. Priests then were a subset of the tribe of Levi and for either, to touch a dead person was to make them ritually unclean. This would require a lengthy cleansing process that might take days before they could resume their priestly responsibilities. Even then it seems people were pressed for time which commentators offer as an explanation for why the priest and Levite crossed the road rather than minister to a wounded perhaps deceased traveler.

Some of you may be familiar with a fairly famous experiment that was done at Princeton Theological Seminary in the early 1970s. What social psychologists Darley and Batson wanted to determine was whether a person's instinctive behavior was correlated to personality type and/or vocational training. They divided 60 volunteer seminarians into two groups telling one they were to lead a discussion on the Good Samaritan while the other group was to lead a conversation about some new operating procedure. Each group was further subdivided and told they had varying degrees of urgency. For subgroup 1 it was extremely important they get to their assignment across campus as quickly as possible. Subgroup 2 was told to get there quickly and the 3<sup>rd</sup> cohort to get there as soon as convenient. As they made their way to their destination, a disheveled actor was slumped in a doorway and moaning as each Seminarian passed by – hurriedly or not. Overall 40%, fewer than half of those who were answering a life-long call to the church, offered any help at all to the victim. Those who were told that timing was extremely urgent only offered help 10% of the time. And there was little correlation with whether the seminarians were to speak about the Good Samaritan or operating procedure.

Does this experiment really tell us anything about human nature? I don't know how rigorously controlled the experiment was but it certainly grabs our attention and appeals to our own experience and sense of human nature. It is a reminder of how eroding our over-scheduled lives can be.

In J. Barrie Shepherd's *A Diary of Prayer, Daily Meditations on the Parables of Jesus*, he makes an

obvious point that must not be missed: "You never really answered that lawyer's question, Lord. He wanted you to tell him whom he had to love; and whom, by implication, he could hate, or neglect as unimportant." Are we not all a bit like that lawyer – perhaps more than a bit? It would seem that our present social and political structure is like that. We read the story from our perch of privilege and piety and assure ourselves that yes, yes we would have behaved as the Samaritan behaved forgetting that the Samaritan is someone we despise. Did you catch that? As Jesus tells the story we find ourselves wanting to be like a person we despise! I am reminded of the heroic Samaritans in the aftermath of the tragic shooting at AME Zion church in Charleston, South Carolina. You will recall that this was when Dylan Roof callously slaughtered nine African-American Christians who had welcomed Dylan to join their prayer group. Before a deeply wounded nation could even grasp the significance of this savage event, immediate family members of the deceased publicly offered to treat the nation's wounds with a breathtaking act of forgiveness. It was for me a truly heroic act and a perfect illustration of what Jesus meant to convey in this parable. But the cancer of racism is stubborn and it keeps metastasizing into uglier more virulent forms, and not just in America but in Europe and around the globe.

We cannot know where this week's events may lead but there are painful, upsetting reminders for nearly all of us from the 1950s and 60s when racial oppression became unbearable and the nation snapped. We have learned a great deal about the causes of this distress but have we gained the will

to address the issues correctly this time? These are fraught times and there are vocal, militant forces that would try to suppress these disturbances with force. It didn't work then and it won't work now. The nation will not be able to deport or jail its way out of the structural racism and injustice that exists today. We need to acknowledge that meritocracy, for all its seeming fairness, is really a bludgeon that has been used to suppress 2/3s of the nation's population. I don't have answers except to say that what we have been doing for the last half century has been proved ineffective in the main.

As we come to a close I want to reflect for a moment on this morning's quote from Dorothy Day: "I really only love God as much as I love the person I love the least." It is an interesting way to firmly plant the two fundamental Commandments in reality. If this were a mathematical exercise we might even offer it as a proof of sorts. If we love God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our strength, and with all our mind, then surely we will obey God's commandments. But if we fail to love our neighbor; fail to treat our neighbor with respect and provide for his care in time of need as Jesus suggests in this parable, can we say we have obeyed God's commandment? And if we haven't obeyed God's commandment to love our neighbor, can it be true that we love God?

Dr. Nelson brought his statement to a close reminding us that half a century ago his predecessor, Eugene Carson Blake, spoke chilling words of indictment at the March on Washington where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. made his historic "I Have a Dream" speech. Blake said "the white Church is late, but we are here

now." And make no mistake, we are a white church. Would it surprise you to know that our denomination is a whisker shy of 90% white? And laudably, that this congregation is one of fewer than 1% where less than 80% are white? You a remarkable congregation in so many ways!

Nelson goes on to say that "it is my prayer that in these critical times we can exclaim that we made significant decisions to engage the historic vestiges of racism in our time. This will require us being spiritually and physically present now, avoiding another institutional sin of being late on arrival. Our silence on the race issue is not an option anymore, and it really never has been. I invite sessions and mid councils to take concrete actions to address this epidemic in local communities and our nation."

When Jesus finished telling the Parable of the Good Samaritan he asked the lawyer "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".

Now.

Amen