

Proper 10-C  
St. John's Cathedral  
July 14, 2019

It was a dark and stormy night in early 1969 (the year of the endless snowstorm). My husband and I were returning to the Tri-Cities from Seattle on a long and snowy drive.

But we had gotten to the home stretch –the last 30 miles or so on the almost-deserted Hanford Highway through the nuclear reservation that led to Richland. Stopping was not allowed on that stretch of road.

About halfway along that road, a car started following us very closely. We were the only cars on the road. We sped up and so did the driver. Finally we thought he was going to pass us but instead he forced us off the road.

We were terrified -- gripped by fear of what this stranger was doing on a dark night. But he meant no harm. He came to our window and told us he had watched our tail lights get dimmer and dimmer as we drove. He was sure our car would simply give out, so he took a chance and forced us to stop. And he was right. Our alternator had failed and the battery was almost dead.

He gave us a ride to Richland, thanked him, and bought him dinner at his choice of restaurant – Roy's Chuckwagon.

The lesson for us: Sometimes compassion comes in the most unexpected package.

And so it was in today's parable from Luke where a man traveling a rough and dangerous road from Jerusalem to Jericho is beaten robbed and stripped, left for dead in a roadside ditch, and then rescued by the most unlikely of rescuers, a Samaritan – a man whose ethnic heritage made him out of bounds for Jews. One to be avoided.

Jesus told this parable in response to a lawyer's question, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' Jesus asks him, what is written in the law? And the lawyer comes back with the right answer: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself". But then the lawyer adds another question—a real zinger: "And who is my neighbor?" Who, in other words, is that person that I am bound to love?

And that is the question that evokes the familiar parable of "Good Samaritan," or maybe more accurately the "Compassionate Samaritan." A story of a man who is attacked and abandoned in a lonely place. Two men with deep roots in Jewish tradition, a priest and Levite pass by without stopping for reasons we do not know.

But a Samaritan saw the man, tended his wounds, put him on his donkey, and took him to an inn where he arranged for and paid for his continuing care. The Samaritan's compassion and generosity are remarkable, but even more remarkable given the enmity between Samaritans and Jews. Sometimes compassion comes in the most unexpected packages.

There are at least a couple of windows into this parable that draw us into the story more deeply. One is the perspective of the person who was rescued – and the other has more to do with the rescuer – the Samaritan – the one who offered compassion.

I've been thinking about how the rescued man might have felt. Grateful? Humbled? Changed? Puzzled? What does it feel like to have someone from a group which you have been alienated save your life?

I think that question is one of the parable's gifts to us because it invites us to think about how we might feel in a similar situation.

What if our rescuer were someone we were conditioned not to like or respect – someone who for us was out of bounds. That guy in the gas station whose t-shirt was so offensive it made you blush. Or someone whose life is so different than yours that you simply don't understand or appreciate them. Or the guy you thought was going to attack you on the Hanford Highway.

At this point, we might squirm a bit as we hear the echo of the baptismal covenant, something we who are Episcopalians have all renewed again and again. The echo of our promise : to “seek and serve Christ in one another, loving your neighbor as yourself.” Our promise to “strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being.”

Who is my neighbor? the lawyer asked. Who is my neighbor? we also ask.

But even more interesting is the rescuer – the Samaritan in this story. Before the Samaritan came along, two men passed by the injured man – a priest and a Levite – men who we could call religious officials. We don't really know why they walked by the injured man.

Some speculate that they were trying to avoid some kind of contact forbidden by religious law, particularly if the injured man was dead. But biblical scholar Amy Jill Levine debunks that theory, arguing that the demand of the law – the heart of the law -- to show compassion-- would overrule that kind of objection.

She says saving a life is the more powerful mandate of the law. So it appears that in this story, both of the priest and the Levite simply chose to ignore and walk past the injured man. Neither Luke nor Jesus suggests anything to the contrary . Apparently neither the priest nor the Levite regarded this man, lying in a heap at the roadside, as their neighbor as the law commands.

We also wonder how this parable speaks to us today – in this time and in this place. One question is to ask is who, for us, might be that helpless person in the ditch on the roadside – the one in need of compassion – of mercy. The one we are called to love. The one we no not pass by.

Perhaps we have people in our lives who come to mind. A couple of events in current shared experience stand out for me.

Certainly the many homeless men, women and children in Spokane and beyond are among the vulnerable ones we encounter. Some stay in shelters, some camp out, some sleep in their cars or stay with friends. But there is no real place to call home.

When I served at the West Central Episcopal Mission, we welcomed many homeless folks to a meal, to worship and to conversation and that ministry continues. Many of you have likely been part of that. One thing I learned there is that my understanding and my relationships with our homeless guests changed when we broke bread together

The number of homeless is growing in Spokane and many parts of the state. Many assume that homeless folks are often drug users or criminals, but this is not so. Most are simply people who have no home, for any number of reasons. They are our neighbors. The ones we are called to love.

The elephant in the room right now, of course, is the distressing and tragic situation at our country's southern border where those who legally seek asylum are being detained in sparse and overcrowded facilities and where children are separated from their parents and held for long periods of time. Children exist without the love, protection and nurture of family and in unacceptable conditions. Questions have arisen about their safety in the stark severity of some of those centers. They are our neighbors, too. How do we extend love?

This past week the bishops of the six Episcopal dioceses in the state of Texas – 11 bishops – issued a statement about this tragedy that is unfolding in their state. Of the 2,000 miles of the border with Mexico, all but about 700 miles are in the state of Texas, so this is in their backyard.

And I would also say that these six dioceses are moderate to conservative in the way they approach issues such as this.

The bishops emphasize care, concern and mercy for these refugees who are living in difficult conditions. They call for a humane and fair system for moving asylum seekers through the system as required by law. They decry the conditions in detention centers. They urge us to pray without ceasing for everyone involved – refugees, elected officials, and law enforcement – while also advocating for the humane treatment of the human beings (our neighbors) crowding our border as they flee the terror and violence of their home countries.”

They remind us that this is a crisis. Refugees come in desperation; border officials are under stress. And they also remind us that as Christians we are commanded to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. That has a familiar ring, especially today—straight from our gospel parable.

We wonder what to do – what will become of this tragic situation.

Our collect today, the prayer that began our worship, asks that we would know and understand what things we ought to do and would have the grace and power to accomplish them. Sometimes we puzzle over that. What to do? But as we pray this prayer, we’re reminded that we need God’s help to sort this out those things that are at the heart of our faith and to get to work on them-- with God’s help.

We will not solve the crisis at the border and the tragedy of homelessness instantly. But we also will not pass them by. We are people of faith, of hope, of prayer, of compassion and of action. The good news is we are also people who are deeply loved by God – as is the whole human family in all of its diversity. Our call is to lean into this generous love and share it.

