

July 15, 2018 - How do we relate to the Good Samaritan today? – Rev. Seth D. Jones

Scripture: Luke 10:25-37

Let us begin by defining ‘Mercy’, because that is an integral part of our parable today.

“Mercy” is the deep sense of compassion and sympathy we have for others and the blessings we give and receive as a result of that sensibility.

So how are we to act on the teaching that is being given in our parable today?

There are three ways that this parable makes itself relatable for us today.

First, the Good Samaritan asks us to continually awaken ourselves to **the people near us who are in need of mercy**.

When you are wondering who needs mercy, look for those who are being rejected, avoided, and discounted in our society today. The progress of classical liberal democracies in the West means the continual integration of formerly rejected groups of people into the freedoms and rights of the culture. In the past, at least in a legal sense, women and African Americans have been given the status of full citizens in this country. But culturally, this integration ebbs and flows, which is to our credit and discredit both. Now, the rejected, avoided, and discounted are immigrants from troubled lands, many in the LGBTQ community, and, as we have become aware, women and people of color who make significantly less than their white and male counterparts on the big screen and in the entertainment industry.

Our ability as individuals to act on those huge global issues is limited in many ways. It is easy to get seduced by the totalizing and universal sense the news wants us to have. They want us to have this sense because they need you to watch, and this results in our sense of Christian mercy becoming ineffectual. *“What can I do to help children at the border?”, “How can I do anything about the massive floods in the Philippines”, “What is another \$10 going to do to help refugees in Syria?”*

Our parable answer this by showing that mercy, in the deepest Christ-following sense, is most effectual with those who are near us, our neighbor. In other words, mercy is always personal, and actions of love are most relevant when they are personal and embodied. **Who near me is in need of mercy?**

Sometimes, this need is blatantly obvious. When I lived in Montana, I was driving home from visiting someone in Livingston, MT. I was on highway 89 coming into Gardiner, which is the northwestern entrance to Yellowstone National Park. The pass leading into Gardiner is a winding mountain road, which is virtually empty from about November to mid-June. As I was driving, I came upon a pickup truck traveling at erratic speeds. He was swerving as well. At the Yankee Jim Picnic Area, about halfway up the pass, this pickup swerved into the other lane and then back across, hit the shoulder, went airborne and over the side of the hill down towards the Yellowstone River. I pulled over and went down to see whether this person had died or had gone into the river. The pickup was about 100 yards off the road and hung up on some large boulders and was completely wrecked. Glass and metal were everywhere, and the truck was upside down.

Amazingly, the driver was awake and alert. His arm and face were cut up by the shattered glass. I talked with him for a few minutes and calmed him down, made sure nothing was broken, found a towel to wrap his arm, and then went to the road to see what I could do. There was no cell reception and no cars. After 15 minutes a car finally came by. I stood in the middle of the road and flagged them down and had them drive the 10 minutes to the bottom of the pass to call the EMTs. They did, and they showed up soon after that. They had to use the jaws of life to extract this person, which took another 20 minutes. Had I not been behind this gentleman, no one would have known he was crashed in his truck, upside down 100 yards off the road. He was someone nearby who was in desperate need of mercy. He needed direct, personal, help.

This is an obvious example of a person in the ditch by the side of the road. I guarantee you, however, that there are many people near you right now who are in need of mercy and the situation is not as obvious. The Good Samaritan relates to us today when we answer the question, *Who near me is in need of mercy and care?*

Second, the Good Samaritan leads us to continually ask the question, **What do I care about?** Notice what inspired Jesus' teaching in the first place. The parable answers two questions – *What must I do to inherit eternal life, and Who is my neighbor?*

Another way to say this would be to say, *“Do the things I do with and for others match what is also in my heart, soul, body, and mind?” “Do I care about this alignment of God’s love and action in my own life?”* The parable helps us understand this alignment with the way of Christ and God’s law and love. Notice that Jesus is speaking to a lawyer about these things. The lawyer *‘stood up to test Jesus’*, and so we know from the outset this is a discussion about how we understand God’s law. The lawyer knows, and is acknowledged by Jesus to be correct, that God’s love is also God’s law. Love and law are inseparable. Jesus asks, *“How do you read God’s law?”*, and the lawyer answers, quoting both Deuteronomy and Leviticus, *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind (Deuteronomy), and your neighbor as yourself (Leviticus)”*. Questions about spiritual law are always answered with God’s love. This is a foundational understanding for both Judaism and Christianity.

It would be a mistake to castigate the lawyer for asking his question. The lawyer clearly cares about the answer. He may be provocative, and he may be self-motivated, but he cares. It may be, though, that his care is misplaced, and Jesus attempts to realign the lawyer’s care with the parable.

It is easy for any follower of God to get caught up in the legalisms, the rules, the right way to do things. This is the reason Jesus sets a priest and a Levite as examples in the parable. A priest is focused first and foremost on the people of his synagogue, in the same way a pastor prioritizes the congregants of her or his church. But this focus clouds our vision to outsiders. We become blind to the needs of others outside our care. A Levite is constrained by the rules of the Temple, and there are all kinds of laws which make the caretakers of the Temple impure. It is not that the rules of the Temple are wrong, and nor is it some anti-Jewish sentiment that Jesus is expressing here. Jesus is showing us that the drive to keep our job, to do the right thing, to follow the rules, reroutes what we care about down a path of blindness and mercilessness.

Jesus undercuts this drive by showing us a parable where what one cares about aligns with what one does. Twice, Jesus tells the lawyer to *“Do this”*. *“Go and do likewise”*. This tells us the love of God is inseparable from the mercy we must have within us because of our faith. Jesus highlights the radical nature of this teaching by using a Samaritan as the agent of mercy in the parable. A Samaritan is worse than just someone from outside the community who doesn’t believe like others in the community. A Samaritan is considered by lawyers, priests, and Levites of Jerusalem to be a distortion and heretical reworking of the Hebrew tradition. Jesus is being intentionally shocking. Outsiders and people who think differently than us are often a clue to how the Lord is bringing us a deep teaching of the faith. The boundary crossers, those whom we have rejected and avoided may be the ones who are teaching us about mercy. Boundary crossers will show us what we really care about, for better or worse, and also whether what we care about aligns with the love of God and Christ. In this way, the Good Samaritan relates to us today when we continually ask ourselves, **What do I care about?**

And this brings us to our third aspect of how to relate the Good Samaritan to today. The Good Samaritan shows us that **mercy is not about money given or things done, but instead the attitude of the heart, mind, and soul**. If the first question the Good Samaritan asks is *“Who is nearby?”*, and the second question is, *“What do I really care about?”*, then the third question is *“Where do I need mercy and care?”*

One of the great dangers of the continual outward focus of our faith is that we never get to have the experience of receiving mercy and care ourselves. I believe that many of us, rightly, want to identify ourselves with the Good Samaritan. We want to be like him and be as generous in our personal help and care of those near us. In doing so, however, are we missing the possibility that you or I might be the man in the ditch in this story, rather than the Good Samaritan showing mercy?

Consider for a moment that, while it is the Good Samaritan who is *showing mercy*, it may be the man in the ditch *teaching mercy*. Henri Nouwen was a Jesuit priest who gained acclaim for his writings and teaching throughout the 50s and 60s. In his later life, in the 1980s, a chance meeting with the head of the L’Arche community in Montreal changed his life. L’Arche is a community for individuals with severe cognitive and intellectual challenges. Nouwen spent most of his remaining years with the residents of L’Arche. He says in

numerous places that his greatest lesson while living with them was the value of being cared for, that being willing to be cared for was itself a gift of mercy. This can be very, very hard for many of us. The humility and openness required to simply receive mercy and care can be an incredible act of mercy itself for others.

Think on this for a moment. In identifying with the man in the ditch, mercy is no longer about the money spent, nor is it even about an effective action done for the sake of another person. Mercy is in the care, openness, and love shown to another, especially if you are the one being cared for. Mercy is often where we, like the lawyer who motivated this whole story, seek to test and justify ourselves and others. But mercy is not made relevant in the world by spreadsheets tracking money spent and given or scorecards that give points for good deeds done. No, mercy is the currency of God's love, and the point is our alignment with God's love in the world with our fellow pilgrims. If you are on the path, and no one nearby appears to be in need of care and mercy, then maybe the one in need of care and mercy is...you. In this way, the Good Samaritan relates to us today by asking us, ***“Where in my life am I in need of mercy and care?”***

Mercy, at least according to the Good Samaritan, can only be given and learned when we are willing to cross boundaries. When boundaries are crossed the differences between one another at once flash into high relief and are also made irrelevant. Mercy cares nothing about the color of your skin, who you fall in love with, whether you feel like a man or a woman or neither or both, whether you believe or do not believe the right things, what your political leanings are, or which Tweet or Facebook post you liked this morning. Mercy cares only about the person nearby, the alignment of the heart, mind, soul, and body with God's love, and being received and given.

To summarize, then, the Good Samaritan relates to us today by asking questions. Three questions that make this parable continually relevant to us are:

Is there someone near me who is need of mercy? Or, How can the mercy God has shown me be made personal toward someone else?

What do I care about? Or, Do the things I care about align with the things God and Christ care about?

And,

Where in my life do I need mercy and care? Or, How can I be open to the experience of receiving mercy?

Mercy is a work of love by way of the heart, mind, soul and body, and is shown by the blessings received and given by and to those around us.

Go, then, each of you, and do likewise.

Peace and grace to all.