

Mercy

Martha C Langford
Third Presbyterian Church
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Luke 10:25-37

On Monday, July 4th, we celebrated the birth of the United States. It was a long weekend of fireworks and flags and pledges that proclaim us to be “one nation under God.” That long weekend has been followed by an equally long week.

On Tuesday, July 5th, in Baton Rouge: Alton Sterling.

On Wednesday, July 6th, in Minneapolis: Philando Castile.

On Thursday, July 7th, in Dallas: Lorne Ahrens, Michael Smith, Michael Krol, Patrick Zamarripa, Brent Thompson, Micah Johnson.

It has been a very long week.

Slavery has been described as our nation’s original sin; racism and prejudice that sin’s lingering evil. This week’s events shine light on the divisions fostered by our birth as a slave nation and the evil that radiates from that beginning.

I remember when I realized that blacks and whites live in two very different Americas. It was like the shameful family secret that everybody knows and no one talks about.

The neighborhood that I grew up in was—by the time I was seven or eight—overwhelmingly African American and middle class. My friends Tracy and Debbie and Diane were the ones who shined a spotlight on those two different worlds.

One Friday, we made a family trip to K-Mart, stocking up on supplies for a trip to Galveston beach. I remember my excitement when the iconic “blue light” lit up by a bin of beach towels. Mema told to choose any one that I wanted. I found a beautiful pattern, reds and blues like the bunting from the fourth of July. It was an unfamiliar flag, so I asked my brother—my smart older brother—to tell me about the flag. He looked and said, “it’s the flag of a country that no longer exists.”

I will never forget that phrase: *the flag of a country that no longer exists.*

Perhaps you have already guessed the “country” and perhaps you can imagine my reception when wrapped in my prized new possession, my friends told me what the flag meant to them: slavery, death, hatred, bigotry.

There I was, the confederate flag wrapping me in the dueling reality of two Americas.

I wish I could say that growing up in my neighborhood—the only white family among a community of black families—immunized me against prejudice and racism, but that would be a

lie. My life has been filled with moments when I find myself wrapped in the ignorance of privilege that has allowed me to turn a blind eye to the distress of my neighbor.

Privilege is my possession, an unearned entitlement of my whiteness.

In Samaria and Judea, we also have the stories of dueling cultures—Samaritan and Judean—both worship Yahweh, both hold Torah, both have temples just not the same one. Despite common bonds, they are divided rather than united; each despising the other.

It is said that good Jews would cross the Jordan to avoid travel in Samaria; to avoid Samaritan hospitality. And it was the same in Samaria—an aversion to neighboring Jews. In fact our reading this morning comes in sequence, just days after Jesus and the disciples have been denied lodging in a Samaritan village. Keep walking the inn keeper said.

That's the backdrop for this story.

We hear how the lawyer came to “test” Jesus. He wanted a definitive answer as to how he might “possess” eternal life, to become its “heir”, to become entitled to all that eternal life offered. Thing is, the lawyer seemed pretty sure about himself already. But still, he asks.

I love it that Jesus answers his question with a question—giving the question back: *You read the law, what do you find?* The lawyer does his job, finding precedence among the law, summarizing from the Shema and the Levitical code.

It's strange to hear these words in the mouth of the lawyer—in Matthew and Mark, it is Jesus who gives the Greatest Commandment and its corollary: Love God and love your neighbor as yourself. Yet even in Luke's gospel, it is Jesus who confirms that this holy triangle of love is at the heart of eternal life saying, “do this and you shall live!”

Wrapped in his security and self-righteousness, the lawyer pushes for the rabbi's definition of neighbor—how far, he asks, does this command to love really go? The lawyer wants to *know* the law—after all, for him the law is the good news. Instead, Jesus uses the question to proclaim a different gospel, a radical good news that is his command.

Jesus tells a parable—one so familiar that the phrase “Good Samaritan” is now part of American speech **and** the American legal code. The tale is simple:

*A man walks alone into the worst part of town,
muggers catch him, beat him half-to-death,
take his wallet and phone, his boots and his clothes
and leave him to die next to the mouth of the alley.*

Jesus helps his crowd identify with the victim—who came down from Jerusalem. That man was each of them, sharing hometown and race and religion and values. Imagine what it might be like

to see him as one of “us”. Imagine it: control and dignity and health and possessions—all our privilege stripped away until we too are bleeding and helpless and dying.

The story goes on: *Others like us,
still wrapped in the mantle of tradition and self-justification,
turn a blind eye to the contents of the alley,
silently cross the street and walk away.*

*Then something extraordinary happens—
something that no one would have predicted.
It is the Samaritan who stops and renders aid.*

Amy Jill Levine says that to hear the scandal of this story, we must imagine ourselves in the ditch and then ask, “Is there anyone, from any group, about whom we’d rather die than acknowledge, ‘She offered help’ or ‘He showed compassion?’” She asserts that we should imagine the “Samaritan” to be from “any group whose members might rather die than help us...”¹

In 1987, Sue Richard reimagined the Samaritan as the “good Communist” from North Vietnam helping the westerner robbed and beaten on the Ho Chi Minh trail.

Last December, Phillip Fletcher reimagined the Samaritan as the “good Muslim” helping the DC resident carjacked on the road to Philly.

Barbara Brown Taylor imagines the story set in the West Bank, with an Israeli Jew in the ditch—bypassed by a Rabbi and a member of the Knesset—helped by a Palestinian member of Hamas.

Guided by Amy Jill Levine, Taylor questions: “Who is the last person in the world you would want to give you CPR... That,” she says, “is your Good (fill in the blank).”

Taylor points to the parable and shares this: “The good news is only good once you have given up your ideas about who is good and who is bad. The quickest way to do this apparently is to get beaten up and robbed because from that perspective, the perspective of the ditch, anyone who stops to help you—I mean anyone—is your new best friend... your neighbor... the one who shows you mercy when you are most in need of it.”²

The story asks “Who is my neighbor?” But we fail to hear the power of this parable unless we hear the depth of the alienation between the man in the ditch and the man who lifts him out. What does it mean to receive compassion across a divide as implacable as racial ethnic and religious hatred? What does it mean to give it?

Valerie Castile said of her son, Philando, “I think he was just black in the wrong place.”

These words made me weep.

Police officers in Dallas were killed because a man came to see white police as targets for his rage over the injustice attending black lives in America. The Dallas police chief shared that the shooter, “was upset about Black Lives Matter... was upset about the recent police shootings... was upset at white people...”

This week has brought a narrative and counter-narrative about power and structural racism, about prejudice and gun violence, about black and white and blue.

If what I read on social media is any indication, our country is settling even further into the foxholes that provide us with cover and allow us to deny or malign the differences of the Americas in which we live. As we slipped into like-minded groups, preaching to the proverbial choir, I wondered, *who will free us from the ditch?*

*Pulled from the ditch, the Samaritan sees to the man's
immediate needs and to his long-term recovery;
out of his own resources, without condition.*

As the Samaritan rides away, Jesus again turns to the lawyer asking him to answer his own question: *Who was a neighbor to the man in the ditch?* I find it striking that the lawyer can't bring himself to speak the word *Samaritan*, saying instead: “the one who showed him mercy.”

Matthew Skinner notes how Jesus turns the lawyer's question on its head. The lawyer wanted the law “to define who deserves his love, but Jesus' parable suggest that love seeks out neighbors to receive compassion and care, even when established boundaries or prejudices conspire against it.”³

Who was a neighbor, the one who showed mercy... and I wonder, *who will we show mercy?*

I wish that I could tell you that as a fourth grader, I immediately dumped my Rebel beach towel at the words of my friends. But, I kept the towel—a kid, clinging to the opportunity to take a real beach towel to the beach and not a tattered bath towel. I didn't use it in front of Tracy or Debbie or Diane, but I didn't let it go. Because even at 10, I carried enough privilege to wrap myself in white America and pretend the hurts and harms of my neighbors were not my responsibility. And even today with each layer of privilege I unwrap, I am met with another that must be uncovered with the help of friends.

So I ask—myself as much as you—How many places will we be content to avert our eyes and pass safely by on the other side of the road?

Douglas John Hall marks our all too human ability to immunize ourselves from the pain of others. He writes, “To move an individual from the condition of ‘natural’ self-preoccupation to one of profound concern for others, the whole gospel—with the cross at its center—is required.”⁴

At the Black Lives Matter protest here in Rochester on Friday, one sign read, “I will not walk by because something ‘is not my business’” That peaceful protest—even with its 74 arrests—carried the gospel to me.

In the cool morning light of Sunday morning, the gospel is once again carried on the shoulders of an unlikely man—whom Jesus names “good” because of his actions. The lawyer can repeat the words, *Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind and your neighbor as yourself*, but the challenge from Jesus is to put them into practice.

Who was neighbor to the man in the ditch? *The one who showed mercy.* Go and do likewise.

Indeed, it has been a long week.

Friday brought these words from Erik Gronberg, the Lutheran Bishop in North Texas and Louisiana. In a letter to the Synod, he wrote,

...the Black Lives Matter movement has challenged us all to take seriously issues of systemic racism. This movement has encountered resistance claiming that by singling out one community they must be excluding another. This is the exclusionary temptation, the lie told that by listening to the story of pain and grief of one community we must ignore the stories of others, the lie told that we cannot care about our law enforcement officers and their families while at the same time challenging the privilege and assumptions that impact how law and justice are carried out. This lie the Church must reject, engaging in compassionate work together....”

Go and do likewise.

Friends, mercy requires action. It requires our presence with those who have been broken by injustice and violence, it requires us to bear witness to their pain and anger and grief, it calls us to tend to the woundedness of others and to spend ourselves in seeking healing and wholeness for our neighbors.

It also calls us to recognize our own brokenness, to share our own lament, to accept the hand that reaches out to pull us from the ditch, to find the goodness in those who would offer healing and wholeness to us—however unlikely.

We do so, because we are allies of Christ, the one who understands what it is to bear the wounds of oppression and hatred and pain and death; the one overcomes the power of sin and evil with love and acts of mercy, and bids us do the same. Amen.

¹ Amy Jill Levine. *The Misunderstood Jew*. San Francisco: Harper, 2006. 148-149.

² Barbara Brown Taylor. *The Right Answer*. The Riverside Church: New York. 14 July 2013. web. <https://youtu.be/wds3OxzHNAI>.

³ Matthew L Skinner. “Exegetical Perspective on Luke 10:25-27.” *Feasting on the Word Year C, Vol 3*. Louisville: WJK 2010. 243.

⁴ Douglas John Hall. “Theological Perspective on Luke 10:25-27.” *Feasting on the Word Year C, Vol 3*. Louisville: WJK 2010. 240.