

Risky Business

**A sermon by Rev. Dr. Gregory Young
Presented on Sunday, July 11, 2010**

Sermon Prayer:

Let us pray. O gracious heavenly father, we do thank you for all that you have offered us in life. We thank you for the very gift of life. We come this morning as we come each morning to praise your holy name. In the midst of our joys and our struggles we pause to worship you to have our lives once again centered upon you and upon the values and principles of your kingdom. So we pray that as you speak to us this morning we might hear your word; that word might come to find its place in our lives and ultimately might guide our lives in the days ahead. I pray in the name of your son, our savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sermon:

Being a disciple or a follower of Jesus is risky business. You may not of thought of it that way, but it is risky business. It can, sometimes, get you in trouble or even cause you to become involved in situations of human need where your own life is threatened. For the most part, however, being a follower of Jesus does not threaten our lives or even the lives of those we love. Being a follower of Jesus usually places us in situations where we try to discern or to understand the correct, or the moral, or the ethical action and then we try to do the "right" thing.

Helping a single mom unload the groceries in her car while she gets the children in their car seats; helping a physically challenged person cross the street, safely; giving sacrificially from our household income to offer relief and support to those lives who have been devastated by natural disasters or by war; well, the list goes on and on and on. And we try to be good people and do the right thing; and isn't that what it means to follow Jesus. Let's face it, my sisters and brothers; we are trying to live our lives in a way that brings goodness to the world and to the lives of others, especially goodness to the people whose lives are entrusted to our care.

Today's Gospel reading is one that has captured the imagination of Christians throughout the centuries. The parable of the "Good Samaritan" poses the question, "Is there a limit to how far God expects us to go in caring for the needs of others? Is there a limit to just how good we have to be to other people? Are we obligated to care for the needs of all, or are we only responsible to care for the needs of our own – our own family, our own friends, our own immediate neighbors living either side of us in our neighborhoods? In the covenant relationship we have with God and with one another in our faith community, what does it mean to "Love your neighbor as yourself?" And, who is my neighbor? What does God expect of us?"

In response to this question Jesus then offers the parable we have before us today. We must note, however, that what prompted the lawyer to ask this question was that he wants to do the right thing, the correct, the moral thing. He wants to know for whom it is he has neighborly responsibility so that he can justify himself. Put another way, he wants to look good to God and to the other members of his faith community. There really is nothing wrong with his desire. I do not know about you, but I know I want to be a positive example of how to live in this world. I want to be a strong and positive role model so that others might say, "That Greg is a good guy. I think I would like to live and pattern my life after his." If the lawyer's desire to justify himself were a wrong motivation, I believe that Jesus would have taken him on, on that point. Instead, Jesus told the parable to see just how far this lawyer was willing to go to justify himself.

In fact, when you look at Jesus' answer to the question that the lawyer asked, he never answered the lawyer's question. The question that the lawyer asked was, "Who is my neighbor?" And Jesus tells this parable to tell the lawyer this is how you love a neighbor. He never helped the lawyer understand who his neighbor was.

As a lawyer, or one who was completely familiar with the laws governing Israelite society, the tension and challenge in the story that Jesus told is easily seen. We miss most, if not all, of the nuances in this story. In the days of Jesus, no one traveled the road from Jerusalem to Jericho alone. No one walked that road alone, whether in broad daylight or at nighttime; no one walked that road alone. Have you ever said to someone, knowing different parts of your community or

other communities; and they're getting ready, maybe they're going into Manhattan or something, and "Well, you may want to avoid these streets. Or you may not want to go to this neighborhood without having a few friends with you. Especially, you know, somebody who has a little heft to them so you can have some protection." Everyone knew when Jesus told this parable, what fool walks the road from Jericho to Jerusalem alone? You're just asking for trouble.

It was a major travel route, many goods were transported by mule or camel along this road and it was a great place for somebody who wanted to commit a crime in an effort to get rich quick. Many highwaymen or robbers victimized the travelers along this road and someone traveling alone was an easy target. Maybe the man, who was traveling along this road, stopped to help someone that he thought needed some help. Have you ever been driving along in your car and you see someone pulled over to the side of the road and you think, "Gee, maybe I should stop to see if they need assistance." But just as you think that thought, a little news story pops into your head that you heard maybe months or years ago about someone, some Good Samaritan, who stopped to help someone who appeared to be stranded at the roadside only to find themselves victimized, duped into helping and they get robbed; they get beaten; sometimes they even get murdered. Maybe that's what happened to this traveler along the road. He saw someone who appeared to need some assistance and he stopped to help and suddenly he finds himself beaten up. And he realizes it was scam; it was a ruse baiting just another innocent victim into a vulnerable situation. The man was beaten and bloody, left for dead and robbed of all of his treasures – funds and other things that were intended to be used to care for his family or to offer to God at the Temple.

Anyone in Jesus' time hearing this story and knowing the Law of Moses would know that you do not touch someone who's bloodied up. If you are on your way to the temple to make an offering to God or to be in service to the priests of the temple, if you stop and your hands get dirtied and soiled with the victim's blood – the only hope you have now is to return home and to wash yourself, to present yourself to the priest and to have yourself restored to the community because you have become contaminated; you are dirty and you must be clean if you're

going to the temple. So any of those hearing that story that day would have known right away if you're going to the temple to perform some holy act, you cannot get your hands bloodied by helping this man. Because, don't we say this, even in church, the most important relationship we have is the relationship we have with God.

This man had been beaten to within an inch of his life, he possibly was not even moving and maybe his breathing was so shallow that you couldn't see his chest moving up and down. He could have very well of been dead. And there again, touching a dead body renders you unclean, and you cannot then continue on that road to the temple to perform holy duties. You must return to your home; you must bath and wash yourself according to the Law of Moses; and then you must, after a period of cleansing, present yourself to the priest to have the priest declare to the community that you are clean and that you are restored to the fullness of the community with all of its benefits and its responsibilities. So anyone hearing this story would know right away you don't touch this body if you're going to the temple to do a holy act.

The Levite and the priest were traveling this road for that very purpose. The Levite was going to worship and to praise God; to stoop down and touch someone and dirty his hands with the blood of that victim and possibly even touching a corpse, would've meant that he could no longer go on his journey – this most important journey to God. Don't we say, even here, we want people to come to church; we don't want them to separate themselves from the gathered body. In Jesus' time, if you were unclean, you could not gather with the gathered body cause you would jeopardize the purity of the community; those who were seeking diligently to fulfill the law. So the Levite and the priest actually did the right thing in this situation according to the Law. And you will notice Jesus did not condemn them for doing that. Jesus did not say they were wrong because they were fulfilling the Law and the lawyer would've clearly understood it.

Then along comes the Good Samaritan. The Samaritan comes from a group of people who were not exiled 500 years before this story was even told. The Babylonians had conquered Israel; and the Babylonians took the elite of Israel and brought them back to Babylon as servants, and they left the lower classes of Israelite

society to fend for themselves. And this group that remained in the Holy Land for those forty years that the elite and privileged were in exile in Babylon, they began to follow the way of pagans. They intermarried with those who were pagan worshipers who worshipped the multitude of gods. And they compromised their faith in order to survive in a desperate situation; and they were in a desperate situation. They compromised their faith. And when Israel was restored after that Babylonian exile, this group of people who had intermarried and had children – the children were seen as half-breeds - and they were commanded to live in an area in the center of Israel that came to be known as Samaria, and they were the Samaritans. In Jesus' day any good Jew living their lives and patterning their lives after the Law of Moses would have no dealings with a Samaritan.

And so when the Samaritan comes on the scene, there is a real shock to those who are hearing this story when this Samaritan stoops down and begins to bandage the wounds of this Jewish man. Now the one who would've rendered others unclean because he was bloody and possibly because he was dead, now he has become unclean because a Samaritan dared to touch him. These are just some of the nuances in this story that we miss because we no longer pattern our lives this way. So the original hearers of this would've been shocked to hear that this Samaritan stooped to help this man who had been victimized on the road to Jerusalem. In fact there were probably those hearing this story who said, "It would've been better to let him die than to let the Samaritan touch him."

Jesus never answered the question of "Who is my neighbor?" Rather, Jesus turned that question back to the lawyer, and said, "Who showed mercy upon this victim?" The reading said that the Samaritan saw this man bleeding and lying in the gutter of the road, left for dead and he had pity. And I think today when we hear the word pity we really don't want to hear that word; we don't want it used at us, or with us. It has some negative baggage with it. And perhaps a better word would be he had compassion. The prefix in that word, "com", means "with"; with passion. And when you look in the dictionary, at least the dictionary that I checked in this week, "passion" has several different meanings. The first definition that was given for "passion" in the dictionary I opened this week (I

think it was a Merriam-Webster) talked about the crucifixion of Jesus as being "passion." It talked about the Passion of Christ, the suffering on our behalf. Passion can mean suffering.

It can also mean a deep attraction of love for another human being – to have passion for someone. In this context however, I believe passion means ardent affection to the point of being moved to an act of extreme love; a strong devotion to some activity, object or concept. And the Samaritan showed a strong devotion to the concept of God's love in this situation. What moved the Samaritan to care for the need of the victim in this parable was compassion. His willingness to allow social barriers that kept Jews and Samaritans separate to be violated so that he could act with ardent affection and strong devotion to another human being in need.

In this parable Jesus does not answer the lawyer's question "Who is my neighbor?" Rather he helps the lawyer and any who will listen, to know how one lives and acts as a neighbor. To love your neighbor as yourself is to extend to the whole human family – not just to some, not just to Jews, not just to our own, not just to those whom we know, even to those we do not know, even those who may hate us or whom we may hate. In the Kingdom of God there is no need to distinguish between people. There is no need to live by the laws that govern us socially and keep us separate and keep us safe.

Everyone is a neighbor and so for Jesus the real question to the lawyer is "Will you live as a neighbor?" To live as a neighbor is to allow compassion for human need to take precedence over social norms and customs. To live as a neighbor is to live vulnerably in that one is always being challenged to let down one's guard; to move from clenched fists and folded arms to open hands and arms that are ready to embrace. It is not about justifying ourselves in an effort to look good to God or to look good to our brothers and sisters and our community of faith. It is about living in the kingdom and placing ourselves under the reign of God; to allow the values and demands of God's kingdom to shape our lives and to dictate our living. And this we cannot do on our own; and the lawyer is a great example of that. He was doing it on his own; he was living the Law that kept him separate from those who were in need. But he was justified in himself and not

justified before God Almighty. This we cannot do on our own; this takes an act of God to accomplish.

How far are you willing to go in your effort to be a disciple or follower of Jesus? That is the real question of these lessons before us today. I believe that everyone here is already doing some good. We're good people. We're trying to make a difference for our families; we try to make a difference in our little garden plot of the world. We do help members of our family who are in need, we offer a helping hand to our neighbors, we even offer support to those who are in our church family through our prayers, our willingness to listen to another's pain, and our efforts to bring a meal, to watch the children or to offer a ride to the doctor, and on and on and on. There are lots of ways that we are already providing positive, Christian role models for those in our community of faith and those who dare to look upon us outside of our community of faith.

The question however that Jesus' parable posed for the lawyer and for us today is, "How far are you willing to go in your effort to love your neighbor as yourself and thus fulfill the demands not of the law, but of God's holy Kingdom? What are you willing to risk for the kingdom of God?"

For you see, being a follower of Jesus is risky business. The Samaritan risked being beaten to death himself the moment he touched that Jewish man who was left for dead. He knew that that could possibly happen, and yet he put that reality aside to have compassion for one who was in need. How is God calling you to be compassionate to those you see along life's way? The moment, the moment you allow that to happen, you are in the Kingdom of God.

Thanks be to God, Amen.