

Date: Sunday July 11, 2010

Scripture: Luke 10:25-37

Title: “The Samaritan”

The Message of Scripture (Sermon Thesis): Faith in action is powerful; faith not in action can be powerful as well.

The Sharing of the Good News (The Sermon Purpose): When we pray God listens. Let us also listen for God when we pray; do both faithfully.

(Remember, it’s all about God!)

A pastor is walking down the street and notices a boy on the other side of the street, at a door, trying to reach a doorbell of a neighbor. The pastor decides to help, so he crosses the street, goes to the boy and says, “Let me lend you a hand,” as he firmly reaches for and pushes the door bell button. Then the pastor leans over to the boy and asks, “And now what my friend?” to which the boy replies “Now we run!” (Miller).

I share that doorbell story this morning because we find some of the same elements in it as in our passage from the Gospel of Luke. This story from Luke - called “The Good Samaritan” although the word good is never used in the passage - is familiar to us and is perhaps the most widely known portion of scripture. In Luke’s story we have a road, the road between Jerusalem and Jericho, a portion of which I have traveled. This is a sixteen mile journey which descends by about not quite three thousand feet as the land slopes toward the Dead Sea. It is a challenging trek geographically, not to mention that road was supposedly well known for being

a dangerous place; a place where running into robbers was not all that uncommon in the ancient time. In today's story there is an unfortunate traveler who happened to be in this wrong place at the wrong time and got his money and his clothes stolen, and got beaten up and left half dead by the side of the road.

In this morning's passage we have professional holy men, who instead of crossing the road to help, pass by the victim on the other side of the road, and apparently make no effort at all to help. We can probably recall sermons about how despicable these men were who did not help this man who was in such great need. It makes us question the possible presence of selfishness among the ranks of those whom we expect to be selfless. We can find it disturbing that those two didn't stop and help.

But their decision not to help is not quite as simple as deciding to cross a street and help a small boy ring a doorbell. Theologian Julie Adkins suggests that if the priest and the Levite are on the other side of the road, that *might* mean they were traveling in the opposite direction: that is, from Jericho to Jerusalem. Being a priest in that day and time wasn't a full-time job. You served in the Temple for about a month out of the year, and then you went back home, wherever home was, to tend your flocks, your crops, and your family. Being a priest was only one aspect of who you were and what you did but it was an important one. (Levites, by the way, are members of the priestly tribe, and they had similar duties to the priests). So perhaps, this priest and Levite are on their way to Jerusalem, to fulfill their annual obligation to serve in the Temple, offering sacrifices on behalf of all God's people

and leading the people assembled in worship.

Ancient Judaism had a very strong and complicated set of rules about appropriate behavior, and what sorts of things were “clean” and “unclean.” Certain animals were clean, and those you could eat; others were unclean, and those you should not eat. Furthermore, there were certain clean ways in which animals should be killed for food; and certain things that could not be eaten together.

There were other items considered unclean as well. A woman with a flow of blood is unclean. Touching blood makes you unclean, even if it’s a matter of washing a wound on your own body, or your child’s body. Touching a dead body is especially unclean; if you do that, you must go through a lengthy process of washing and purification. All these rules are all very strict.

So, imagine, you are on your way to serve for a month as the priest-in-residence, where hundreds if not thousands of people are depending on you to offer sacrifices for their sins in a manner that will be pleasing to God, and will induce God’s forgiveness ... you’re probably not very likely to stop and check on a bloody stranger by the side of the road, who might in fact be a bloody corpse by the side of the road. If you did, you would be jeopardizing your ability to do your job in the way that you believed God required it to be done. You couldn’t risk numerous other people’s sacrifices, and forgiveness, and status before God, for the sake of just one by the side of the road.

Today we don’t understand God as being that legalistic; indeed, Jesus himself

tried to get people beyond the focus of just keeping the law. But in their own day and time, and their own worldview and understanding of God, the priest and Levite's avoidance of the injured man made sense. Their inaction didn't mean they were being selfish. Now, I'm not excusing them, but I am lifting up that their faith required – or at least, they sincerely believed that their faith required – that something else was more important than taking action in this particular instance, for this particular individual.

I think it's important for us to remind ourselves that sometimes, inaction may be a faithful response. We don't even have to leave our own homes to be surrounded by the cries of needy people. Letters requesting donations arrive in the mail; newspaper stories tell of sad situations and how we can help; the television and internet bring us stories of misery from around the world. We can't do it all. Every one of us here could empty our bank accounts to feed hungry people, and it might take care of a small city for a few weeks, but that would be it. We need to have a spirit of discernment about what God is calling us to do, what God is giving us a passion about, what opportunities God seems to be placing in our way, and put our faith into action in those places, and trust God to make other people passionate and concerned about those things that we are having to say "no" to.

So, if your passion is feeding hungry kids, you may need to let other people worry about finding them shelter. If God has given you a gift for visiting people in prison, it's okay to let others be responsible for visiting them in the hospital. If God seems to be calling you to focus your energy on helping young adults, then you can

trust God to call other people to focus on the elderly.

Putting our faith into action means that, in other areas, we will have to be inactive. And we need to let ourselves see both of these, action and inaction, as faith decisions. That is, decisions about what our vocation will be, about the stewardship of time, the giving of resources, and the sharing of lives. Sometimes we have to say no and we need to let our faith inform when we say no just the same as it informs when we say yes.

But let's get back to the Samaritan. With this parable, Jesus is trying to get people's attention by making someone they would normally despise the hero of the tale; similar to if we told this story with a member of Al-Qaeda in the starring role. In today's passage, faith is seen in action, and sometimes people whom we think believe the wrong things end up demonstrating faith that we can learn from. We know people by their works; that's all that we can see; we can't dissect a person and see their faith. So if a Samaritan, a member of Al-Qaeda, or a lady down the street we don't agree with, does the right thing; if that person takes the proper course of action when a couple of religious leaders do not, then who are we to say that the other person's faith is wrong?

This parable must be turned in both directions to make it work. We've been taught all our lives to understand that the answer to the question "Who is my neighbor?" is, "Anyone who needs me." And that's half the story. But if you look at the end of the parable, the question that Jesus asks the lawyer is this, "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor *to the man who fell into the hands*

of robbers?” and he answers correctly, “The one who showed him mercy” (Luke 10:36-37).

Not only are neighbors the people who need us ... Neighbors are also the people we need. Neighbors are the ones who help us, who show us mercy, who do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Culturally, that’s a tough concept for us. We value independence, self-reliance, and paying our own way. Being in need is something we don’t like. We’re perfectly happy to help others, of course, bless their hearts. But we easily get offended when others offer to help us. Do they think I’m incompetent? Do I look like an idiot? I can do it myself perfectly well, thank you! Sometimes, of course, it’s true that we could do it ourselves. And sometimes, it is true that we cannot (Adkins).

Today we have the person who needs the help – the one trying to ring the doorbell and the one left for dead in a ditch. Have you ever needed help? Have you ever been in a ditch? Maybe you are in a ditch right now. When we are broken and bloody in a ditch by the road, a neighbor is a welcome sight. But, what does it mean when our pride keeps us from letting other people be our neighbors? It seems to me that there are times when we need to acknowledge the grace of inaction in order to let others be a neighbor to us. It is hard for us to discover and admit things that we can’t do. However, it seems that those things grow in number as we grow older. Some are no big deal, like, I can’t touch my toes any more. Others are a very big deal: I can’t see well enough to drive any longer. I can’t take care of my spouse all by myself while he or she is sick. I can’t climb the stairs in my house any longer

because I'm in too much pain. We tend to see things like these as a failure. But that's the culture speaking, not our faith.

Our faith invites us to reframe the things we can't do, these inactions that cause us grief and to understand them instead as opportunities to make and to meet neighbors. Sometimes, the most grace-filled and faithful thing we can possibly do is to let someone else serve us. Sometimes, we demonstrate our faith with inaction (Adkins).

Whether it's putting our faith into action, or letting our faith dictate inaction, the key, of course, is faith. What does God expect of me, and what does God not expect of me? What does God need for me to be doing in the world, and what does God have other people doing that I should stay out of? Faced with any situation or any choice, where does God want us to act, and where does God want us to let someone else have a turn?

Faith in action and faith inaction; both are faithful choices. We ask God to give us the grace and the discernment to know when to offer which and today's good news is that when we ask, we know God hears. Ask and listen. Action and inaction. Let us be willing to do both as we contemplate faithfully caring for and faithfully being cared for by our neighbors. Listen, is that the doorbell? Let us pray.

Dear God,

We ask that you guide us in the ways that we can serve you most faithfully and

we pledge to allow times of action and inaction (silence). For faith that you make possible, we give you thanks. And so we pray. Amen.

Offering: We put our faith into action when we give our morning offering. The ushers will please . . .

Dedication: Lord, accept and bless these gifts so that they are used for putting faith into action, however you know is needed. This we pray, Amen.

Benediction: Go forth and live as God's people blessed by the love of God that lifts us all. Go forth. Amen and Amen.

Sources:

Adkins, Julie; Lectionary Homiletics; www.goodpreacher.com; 2010.

Holy Bible – New Revised Standard Version; Harper Bibles: San Francisco; 2007.

Miller, Paul – Editor; “World’s Greatest Collection of Church Jokes”; Barbour Publishers: Uhrichsville, OH; 2003.