

“The Good Other”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Congregational Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
July 10, 2022 – Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
Psalm 82; Luke 10:25-37

We find in our gospel lesson for today, the Parable of the Good Samaritan, some of the most beloved and challenging words in our scriptures. In the parable, we are told that a man is traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho, and on his way he got mugged, was beaten and bloodied, and was left “half dead” on the road (I’m not sure what “half dead” means medically, but I’m sure it is totally bad). Finding the poor man while coming down the same road were a couple of people -- holy people in a priest, who served God by facilitating the people’s worship in Jerusalem’s temple, and a Levite, a member of one of Israel’s tribes who were set apart as those who led and assisted temple activities. In their day, these religious leaders were respected good guys. And so we would expect the good guys to do good things when they came upon the “half dead” man on the road down to Jericho. But, surprisingly, the good guys didn’t act at all like good guys by stopping to help. Instead, they just walked on by.

However, later coming down the same road was a Samaritan. Now the Samaritans were a group of people who lived in the lands between Jewish Judea and Galilee but who were *not quite* Jewish. While they had the same ancestors as many of the Judean and Galilean Jews, they did not worship at the temple on Mount Zion in Jerusalem, but in their own land on Mount Gerazim. The Samaritans and Jews each considered themselves and their traditions of worshipping God to be correct and pure while considering the other to be incorrect and impure. To Jesus’ Jewish audience, the Samaritan was admired or esteemed, but disliked and downright despised; the Samaritan was a bad guy.

Just as surprising as the story’s good guys, the priest and the Levite, behaving badly is that the story’s bad guy, the Samaritan, does what is right and good. Instead of walking on by the “half dead” Jewish man, the Samaritan comes near to him, sees his need, and actively attends to him. The Samaritan stopped everything he was doing to help the man live and heal, bandaging his wounds, pouring on oil and wine, taking him to an inn, and caring for him there, and then

paying for the innkeeper to continue caring for him while he continued on his journey.

In acting mercifully and graciously, the Samaritan ends up being the story's true good guy, and so Jesus, as he does so often in his parables, flips the script on what really matters. From the perspective of Jesus' listeners, the Samaritan was but an impure outsider, and yet he demonstrated the goodness of one who has a pure heart that is close to God's own heart. And the holy and pure priest and Levite, temple workers who were viewed as being pure and close to the presence of God -- the ultimate insiders -- did not act in love as God would have them act.

The parable teaches us that the right appearance, the esteemed station, or lofty title don't matter as much as a heart full of love that moves us to be concerned and act for the good of others when we see them in need. When we act for the good of the other, we demonstrate neighborly love, and that is what truly matters in life. And the purest form of love is demonstrated when we love our neighbors that we would *rather not* consider to be our neighbors -- when we love those who we see as Others or outsiders.

The opportunities for us to love this way are many, because the field of those we consider to be Others is vast and growing. We live in a pluralistic society, like many before us, in which we have many differences in religion, ethnic background, race, political perspective, experience and expression of sexuality; however, while our diversity is one of our great strengths, it becomes a source of weakness when we allow the many differences that exist between us to divide us. We consider ourselves to be right, pure insiders; and we view those who differ from us as being wrong, filthy outsiders, unworthy of our friendship, and certainly undeserving of our neighborly love. A lesson for us in today's reading is that the Other is our neighbor, and just as the good Other did what was right and good by showing love, we too should love the Other, especially the Other in need.

A wonderful example of people demonstrating such acts of neighborly love for an Other appeared in an article in yesterday's Boston Globe. Right at the top of the front page was a story about a person who was hiking alone a couple of weeks ago on Mount Monadnock in southern New Hampshire when he slipped and fell. After falling for 20 feet or so, tumbling down some of the slick rocks at the top of the mountain, he landed head-first upon the hard granite and was unable to

move and bleeding badly from splitting his head open on the rocks. Another hiker heard him calling for help and rushed to his aid along with several others, some of whom were doctors and other healthcare workers who were able to control the bleeding and stabilize him until rangers arrived with a stretcher. Many hikers on the mountain, all strangers to the man who fell, took turns carrying the stretcher as they traversed the bare mountaintop for miles until reaching a helicopter landing pad, from which the hiker was taken by helicopter to a hospital, where he was successfully patched up and told that he'll make a full recovery.

It is refreshing to read stories such as this one about people loving helping an unknown neighbor in need. And it's wonderful that this one was put on the front page of the newspaper. I wish that demonstrations of people caring for one another would be recognized and celebrated more often, for we need reminders that people loving one another and being good neighbors is truly much more common than people causing harm to one another, which is what we pay way too much attention to. Perhaps if we focused more on the goodness of people and shouted more loudly about examples of love, we might all feel better about the world we live in and have more hope that we can create a better world for ourselves and our children. Perhaps each time our attention is pulled to some terrible act of violence, instead of despairing, we can recommit ourselves to resolutely acting in neighborly love, especially for the least of our neighbors in need and on behalf of the most othered among us, and so work to erase divisions and tear down walls between us and them, insiders and outsiders, and pure and impure. In so doing, we can offer a healing balm to our communities, nation, and world. Amen.