

Sermon for Sunday, July 10, 2017

HOMEBOY  
Luke 10:25-37

Everybody who has attended church for a while, is familiar with what is often called “The Parable of the *Good Samaritan*.” We might be so familiar with the story that we forget Jesus’ question to the unnamed lawyer, “What is written? What do you read?” It’s a seemingly innocent question, but you and I know that no question Jesus ever put to anybody is a simple question. It comes in direct response to the lawyers’ inquiry, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus’ gets annoyed: “You know. You know what the Torah says about that.” And like a good pupil, the lawyer recites, “Yup, I know. Love God and neighbor. What I really want to know, though, is ‘Who is my neighbor?’” Now, Jesus is really annoyed, and so he tells the man a story. “This parable is for you!” And when Jesus tells a parable “just for you,” you really are in trouble.

Jesus challenges the lawyer here to check his assumptions which he inherited from the tradition. And he challenges the man to also check his own interpretation of these assumptions. “*What is written? What do you read?*” The ball is now in his court. And as we are challenged by this text today, the ball is in our court as well. “What is written? And what do we read?”

Martin Luther King Jr. pondered the meaning of this parable and came to the following conclusion: “I am going to tell you what my imagination tells me,” in other words, Dr. King lets us know what *he* reads when he interprets the parable. “It is possible that the [priest and the Levite]” were afraid. ... And so the first question that [they] asked was: ‘If I stop and help this man, what will happen to me?’ ... But then the Good Samaritan came by, and he reversed the question: ‘If I do not help this man, what will happen to him?’” There it is. Dr. King reframes the issue of the parable for us and I think he does for us what Jesus wanted the lawyer to realize as well. The fundamental issue of Jesus’ concern has nothing to do with eternal life. It has nothing to do with ritual purity, nothing to do with “doing the right religious thing.” Instead, it has everything to do with one of the most important ethical imperatives for a person of Jewish heritage: You must help the person who absolutely cannot help him- or her-self. In this way, Jesus does away with one of the great myths of our time, that God will help those who help themselves.

The Samaritan coming upon a man on the road to Jericho who might be dead serves as hyperbole here. As the *Babylonian Talmud* states: “As long as there are no other people to look after the burial of a corpse, the duty is incumbent on the first Jew that passes by, without exception, to perform the burial.” The burial of the dead is a sacred duty because it cannot be repaid by the one who benefits from it. It is no coincidence that Jews stood vigil at *Ground Zero* until every one of the dead was recovered.

So, the issue of Jesus’ parable is not “who is a good Jew,” i.e. the priest or the Levite, or “who is a bad Jew,” i.e. the enemy, the apostate, the Samaritan. The issue is simply about

attending to a human person in dire need who cannot repay the favor, no questions asked. The Samaritan, good or bad, tended to a dying person in a ditch, bandaged his wounds, took him to a safe place and put up his money for a stranger, just because it is the right thing to do. It's what God in Jesus Christ did for us. It's what Jesus wants you and me to do for others. "Go and do likewise." This is what is written. But how do we read it?

I don't think we need to go far to find someone "lying in the ditch" who cannot repay our kindness. The needs in our world are more than obvious. Often, perhaps most of the time, they are overwhelming. And we don't have to look further than our own homes, perhaps, or our city. But Jesus suggests in this parable that we need to do more than look, that we need to do more than merely ask, "Who is our neighbor?" Jesus does not want us to *identify* our neighbor. Jesus, calling upon the tradition, wants us to "*make neighbors.*"

There is a Jesuit priest living in Los Angeles. His name is Father Gregory Boyle. For years, he watched how young people in more than 700 gangs would destroy their lives and other people's lives. But after he buried one too many youth who had died as a result of gang violence, he was done watching. He decided to "make neighbors" in order "to change our lurking suspicion that some lives matter less than others."<sup>1</sup> So, Father Boyle went out into the streets to talk to gang members. He began tending to those nobody else wanted to have anything to do with. He picked them up, bound up their wounds, and took them to a place where they could be healed and restored to their community.

In the late 1980's, Greg Boyle founded a mission, which is now called *Homeboy Industries*. Former gang members and prison inmates run a café, a bakery, a catering business, a farmer's market, and a silkscreen and embroidery shop. They provide mental health, legal, and tattoo removal services, offer domestic violence and substance abuse support, and run a solar panel training program. Greg Boyle is not a "good" priest nor is he a "good" Samaritan. He read what was written and he did not just watch. He acted. He did what Jesus asked the lawyer, what Jesus asks you and me to do. "Go and do likewise! Make neighbors! That's the way you show God's mercy!"

Both Jesus and Father Boyle challenge us to "change the lurking suspicion that some lives matter more than others." It's hard not to think about this challenge in light of the events, which transpired just a few days ago. Two black men shot by police, one in Louisiana and one in Minnesota. Five police officers killed in Dallas. This is not the way we "make neighbors." But rather than directing our energies toward talk and blame about right and wrong, "bad" people or "good" Samaritans, we would do well to take Jesus' parable to heart, assess our community and find out how we can best "make neighbors," and then go out into our community to pick these neighbors up, bind up their wounds, and take them to places where they can be healed and restored. According to Jesus, that's what it means to be God's *Homeboy ... or Homegirl*.

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