

Eighth Sunday After Pentecost -- Elise Merrill-Cranston

Luke 10:25-37

Last week Jess gave our congregation a gift. The words from the pulpit reminded the church that our reputation matters. Jess preached that the church's reputation has not been one of healing among many groups, especially the LGBTQ community, but has left various groups of people rejected and marginalized. While we at St. Paul's might think we exude an impression of inclusivity, quite boldly and generously Jess illuminated the truth that in our silence and complacency we have not lived up to what we have promised.

Two weeks prior, Christina's sermon called to our attention to the fact that the church has fallen short. We have shuffled off our sins onto our queer brothers and sisters, shut them out of our institutions, and continually shamed them for who they are. Both of these sermons, faithful to the scriptures, reveal that the church has been found wanting.

You think I would give it a rest—after all, you are not supposed to beat a dead horse. But sorry, our Good Samaritan lectionary text is clear. This week, again, the church is on trial. The church is on trial for walking past kingdom business. The church is on trial for intentionally moving to the other side of the road while we pass those who are hurting. The church is on trial for not going out of our way for the sake of the gospel.

In the wake of the Orlando tragedy Jess and Christina rightfully informed us that the Church and this church had fallen short for our LGBTQ brothers and sisters. We faced the reality that our silence was a deadly luxury. It was my intention to continue this much needed conversation about our rejected queer friends, but as is all too familiar and common in this country, tragedy struck again this week. This week we are on trial in the wake of the murders of our neighbors, Alton Sterling and Philando Castile, and the hundreds of other black men and women murdered this year. The church has been more concerned with our own well-being than that of our neighbors.

In our gospel text we find a lawyer who is wishing to test Jesus by asking what he must do to enter the kingdom of heaven. Jesus puts the question back to the lawyer, asking what he has read in the law. The lawyer responds by quoting scripture—love the Lord God and love your neighbor as yourself. This is clear enough for Jesus who responds, *You have given the right answer, do this and you will live.* But the lawyer was wishing to justify himself. This is clear when the lawyer responds to Jesus, *Who is my neighbor?* This question attempts to limit whom the lawyer must love.

Wouldn't it be better if we just had to love those who look like us or those that we like? Don't we all find ourselves acting like this lawyer, creating picket fences and lines in the sand about whom we have to love? We get the lawyer's question; it makes sense. If we know where the line is, then we know for whom we do not have to cross it. If you are anything like me, a J on the Myers-Briggs, we do not like the ambiguity of Jesus' answers—the fences make it easier.

Jesus responds with the famous parable of the Good Samaritan. In his famous speech, "I've Been To The Mountaintop," MLK Jr. describes this parable, saying, "Jesus immediately pulled that question from midair, and placed it on a dangerous curve between Jerusalem and Jericho." We read that a man on his way from Jerusalem to Jericho is assaulted on this dangerous road to the point of near death. He is left stripped, bruised, and bleeding on the side of the road.

But what good fortune, a priest happened to be walking by! Surely he, a man of God, will stop and help. I wonder if the injured man saw the priest and the Levite pass by on the other side of the road? I wonder if he got his hopes up that one of them would stop to help? Or I wonder if he knew that he was out of luck as soon as he saw them?

Have you guys ever seen someone or something on the road that caused you to cross over to the other side? Or maybe we have been at a stoplight and locked our doors if a scary-looking person stands there with a sign pleading for help. Or maybe we do not go into certain neighborhoods. These feelings, driven completely by fear, cause us to walk past humanity, leaving people to die. MLK Jr. speaks to the power of this fear too. He speculates that the priest and the Levite pass by because of fear of this well-known and dangerous road. This road came to be known as the “Bloody Pass.” MLK continues that it is even possible that these two men thought that the robbers were still close by waiting to jump them. Or maybe this man was faking his injury only in order to lure them over to him and then seize them.

I hope we don't fancy ourselves too different from the church's role in this story. I do not think it was a mistake or coincidence that our counterparts in this parable are shown walking past people in pain and agony—walking past those who are dying on the other side of the road. This scary road, with its unknown variables, caused the priest and the Levite to ask themselves, “What will happen to me if I stop and help this man?”

Then the Samaritan passes by and reintroduces us to Jesus' upside down kingdom. Instead of asking the question, “What will happen to me if I stop to help this man?” the Good Samaritan asks, “What will happen to this man if I do not help him?” Moved with compassion and pity, the Samaritan stops and cares for this hurting man. After cleaning the wounds he carefully bandages the man up, places him on his own animal, and takes him to an inn.

One blogger, Doug Muder, suggests there is a connection between the importance of the “Black Lives Matter” movement and the Good Samaritan. Muder asks the questions, why is Jesus so specific in this parable? Why is the hero specifically a Samaritan?

By now most of us know that Samaritans and Judeans were not buddy-buddy. Throughout the gospel stories there are various encounters that illustrate the tense relationship between the two groups. Like in John 4: Jesus is passing through Samaria and asks a woman for water, to which she responds, “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan, how can you ask me for a drink?” Jews and Samaritans typically did not associate themselves with the other. Some theologians even speculate that the lawyer answers Jesus, saying that *the one who showed him mercy* was the neighbor, because as a Jew he could not bring himself to say that it was the Samaritan who acted as the neighbor.

So why the Samaritan? Why is Jesus so specific? The third passerby could have been just any random person, to prove that anyone is your neighbor. The parable would be known as “The Good Person.” That would be a nice broad principle, and even if it didn't specifically say a Samaritan is my neighbor, it would be implied. It would be much harder for Judeans to say that a Samaritan was their neighbor; it would stick in their throats—while “anyone is my neighbor” has a feel-good sentiment that does not force anyone to confront his or her specific prejudice.

Jesus is not trying to promote that Samaritans are better than Judeans with this story, just like the Black Lives Matter sign is not meant to imply that other lives do not matter. As we have experienced with all the negative feedback from the sign, part of Black Lives Matter is that it sticks in the throat of white Americans. It forces us to confront our own prejudices. People want the sign to be broad, saying “All Lives Matter,” because it is a feel-good abstraction without any skin in the game. Jesus was specific; the parable is called the Good Samaritan. Our sign is specific, it reads Black Lives Matter.

But like Jess reminded us last week, we have to keep finding new ways to say Black Lives Matter. It is not just enough to have the sign. We must ask ourselves the Samaritan's question, “What will happen to this people group, our friends, if we do not stop to help?” As made clear this week, lives are at stake here. As a white American I had the privilege of forgetting the importance of the sign out front. These tragedies have awakened me from the ignorant dream that all is safe and well, because for so many driving to the corner store or wearing a hood could cost their lives.

What will continue to happen to our black brothers and sisters if we do not stop and listen? What will happen to the black community if we as the church continue to be silent in the face of violent injustice and systemic racism? We can no longer play it safe with questions about what will happen to our jobs, status, families, etc., if we stop and help, if we join the movement. We cannot be like the priest or Levite any longer, passing by concerned with our own safety and purity. We have to be like the Samaritan, asking ourselves what will happen to the black community if we continue to turn a blind eye. There is blood in the streets; we cannot keep ignoring it.

Maya Angelou once said, “History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again.” We cannot undo the sins of the past, but we can move forward. St. Paul's needs to open our imagination and begin thinking about all the different ways we are going to keep saying Black Lives Matter. This is only the beginning of the conversation. May we have the eyes and ears to hear the suffering of our neighbors and the courage to not turn a blind eye and walk away. Amen.