

Lectionary 15C 2019, Luke 10:25-37, July 14, 2019, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

Some Biblical texts should be simple to understand. Some Biblical texts can be a bit more challenging to interpret and grasp. The Parable of the Good Samaritan is simple. The neighbor you love in order to fulfill God's great commandment is simply the one in need. Period. End of story.

The man who questions Jesus is identified as a lawyer. He already knows the answer to the first question. You want eternal life? Love God whole heartedly and love your neighbor as you would yourself. The law is clear. What's not so clear is exactly who constitutes being your neighbor. Apparently, this question is open to some legal interpretation. Is a member of your own tribe your neighbor? Yes. Is a member of a neighboring tribe your neighbor? Yes, if they belong to the same religion. Is the resident immigrant or refugee living in your village your neighbor? Maybe. In other words, the lawyer wants to know which class or group of people qualify as the neighbor I am obligated to help in order to gain eternal life. The question is purely transactional. Purely self-serving. I want eternal life. I know I must love my neighbor in order to get there. Who is the neighbor I am obligated to love to get there?

The contours of the story Jesus tells are familiar. A man gets mugged on the road and left for dead. Presumably a Jew, like the lawyer asking the questions. Two religiously devout men, also Jews, pass him by. A third, not a Jew, a Samaritan, who was supposed to hate Jews, just as Jews were supposed to hate Samaritans, stopped to help. We know the point Jesus is trying to make here. You'd expect a Jew to help a fellow Jew out. That's the legally fulfilling definition of the neighbor you're supposed to love to get eternal life. If you were a Jew and you saw a Samaritan in need you weren't obligated to help. He's not a neighbor. He's scum. Samaritans were supposed to stay in their own land. If you saw a Samaritan it meant he crossed your border and he was where he wasn't supposed to be. He was an illegal alien. The same in the story Jesus tells. The Samaritan was on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, far outside of Samaria. He was in a place he wasn't supposed to be. If he knew what was good for him he'd keep his head down, walk on by, try to stay invisible, avoid the immigration authorities.

We often miss the profound and potentially dangerous risk the Samaritan took when he stopped to help the Jew beaten up on the road. Imagine a man from Guatemala in our country without authorization, no green card, no official papers or identification, and stops to help an ICE officer in distress, Immigration and Customs Enforcement. That's the kind of risk the Samaritan took. The kind of risk that doesn't count the cost at all. The kind of risk that potentially costs everything.

Notice how Jesus turns around the question the lawyer asks. The lawyer wants to know, “who is my neighbor?” Jesus asks, “who in the story was the neighbor to the one in need?” The lawyer wants a legal definition of a neighbor, the one I am legally obligated to help. Jesus isn’t interested in the legal definition of neighbor. Neighbor, for Jesus, is simply someone in need. Here I imagine the stunned look on the lawyer’s face. Because Jesus just asked the man to imagine himself, not in the position of one giving aid, but rather in the position of receiving aid from someone so abhorrent and so undesirable. I imagine him virtually stammering out his answer, “The, the, Samaritan.” The lawyer took a profound risk in his answer. But in doing so he discovered the freedom Jesus comes to give. Freedom from the bondages we create for ourselves by dividing the world up into legal definitions of those we should help and those we shouldn’t or need not help. Jesus doesn’t care about all that. He comes to free us from those artificial bonds. The neighbor is someone in need. The neighbor is you.

Jesus’ call to discipleship always involves risk. It means crossing the boundaries we create for ourselves, stepping over the double yellow lines that keep one person or one group of people separated from another. It’s when we cross these boundaries that true human community begins to happen. And I believe that’s what’s at the heart of this parable. The possibility of creating a new kind of community. We create communities with people who are like us; who look like us, who speak the same language, who have the same customs. But Jesus comes into the world and begins to gather around him all sorts of people. People who wouldn’t otherwise associate with one another, who saw in each other someone different, someone undesirable. Jesus gathers them together and creates a community based on sacrificial love and not shared characteristics.

Because at the heart of this community is the sacrificial love of Jesus himself. The one who crossed the ultimate boundary between God and humanity, who took on enormous risk in taking on human likeness, who gave himself away and suffered and died.

We are that stunned lawyer. Because like the Samaritan, Jesus crossed over to the other side and rescued us. He has lifted us, dressed our wounds, brought us to this inn of respite where we might begin to recover. We are invited to see ourselves, not in the role of helper, but in the role of one who is helped. Only then, when we see ourselves as the neighbor in need, can we truly become a neighbor to someone else. Amen.