

A BRIEF MEDITATION ON THE GOOD SAMARITAN

Peter JB Carman

Emmanuel Friedens Church, Schenectady NY

Church Picnic, July 10, 2016

Luke 10:25-37

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?"

He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."

And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead.

Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?"

He said, "The one who showed him mercy."

Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

Christianity for too long has been preoccupied with the ME questions. So it was that at the very beginning, a lawyer with mixed motives came to Jesus with two of what he must have thought were the hardest simplest questions. The I questions, the me questions. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" He asked. ME, me me. What do I need to do to get into heaven? But there is something still about having the conversation with Jesus that changes everything. First, Jesus got his questioner to answer his own question. "What does the law say?" And the response was good—"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." Love is the answer, in the midst of a violent, struggling world. Love is the answer—not just

the sincere love of God, but also love for your neighbor. Love is the answer to fear. Love is the answer to self-righteousness. Love is the answer to guilt and love is the answer to structural injustice. Simple, right?

“Not so fast, Jesus. Who is my neighbor?” Now Jesus could have answered the question many ways. He could have indulged in generalizations. He could have come back with legal principles or theological abstractions. But no, he came back with one of the most powerful stories the world has ever heard. "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead..." And we all remember the rest. First came the Priest, then came the deacon, both too busy, or too fearful or too worried about getting infected or getting beaten themselves, too busy with other appointments to stop. The third passerby was a member of another religious group, another subculture—another people. A despised Samaritan. He not only stopped, he not only bound up the man's wounds, he used his own hard-earned money to provide housing for the victim of violence. The least likely person to help out turned out to be the real neighbor. Mercy and openness to the stranger turn out to be the measure of good neighborhood. Mercy and the willingness to cross borders turns out to be the measure of real love. Go and do likewise.

This past week we have learned of more terrible violence. We have, thanks to social media, beheld the killing of two black men in Louisiana and, (not Mississippi but) Minnesota by police officers. We have been then further shocked by the murder of five police officers by a sniper in Texas. And it is all very close, the miles mean nothing, the neighborhood of our humanity has been torn beyond recognition: again. And again. And nothing can justify it.

Today I am not here to answer unanswerable questions. But I do want to say a word about my own story, and yours. For we have been, each of us, where that lawyer was, asking the me questions, the self-righteous questions. We know what it is to be preoccupied with our own righteousness, our own salvation. And the story that Jesus tells invites us to examine our own memories, and ask not the obvious question of “When did I help out a stranger?” but rather the other question. When was I or someone I loved injured by the side of a road, and the unexpected person came by? When did I, in my hour of deepest need, find that the neighbor who showed me mercy looked a whole lot different than I expected? Until we begin with gratitude for the person who saved OUR life, we will not understand. Until we see our neighbors from the vantage point of our own vulnerability rather than from the position of power, we will not see the Kingdom of God.

I don't want to talk too long today; I respectfully want to ask that we instead to come to prayer time together acknowledging that this week we all know what it is to be wounded. I want us to be able to share our grief and need, in the still

overwhelming wake of this week's racial violence in America. But before we go there, I ask you to remember in your own life, when you were down, perhaps at the end of the line, and someone unexpected extended to you the hand of compassion and mercy. Remember your own story, and look into it for the place where you may rediscover "Who is my neighbor?" and not "What must I do to inherit eternal life" but rather in bits and pieces begin to answer the question, "What can you and I do to redeem this life, this neighborhood, this nation?"