

Proper 10 Year C
July 14, 2019
St. James, Wheat Ridge

By the Rev. Becky Jones

What a nice little story our gospel lesson this morning is.
A nice little story with a nice little moral.
It's especially nice for those of us
who fancy ourselves as good-deed doers.
We hear it with a satisfied ear,
because we're pretty sure that,
like the Good Samaritan in the story,
we think we, too, would have stopped to help.
At least we hope we would have.
And it's pretty satisfying to judge
that priest and that Levite, too, isn't it?

When we hear this story,
we tend to put ourselves in the place of the Samaritan,
and that's a pretty comfortable place to be.

But I have a suspicion that when Jesus told this story,
he wasn't inviting us to imagine ourselves
as the hero.
I think Jesus really intends for us
to identify not with the Samaritan,
but with the person lying there in the ditch.

That's the place we ought to find ourselves in
when we listen to this story.

We're lying there, in that ditch,
and we desperately need someone to have compassion on us.
Even if that someone is our sworn enemy.
We need our enemy to forget what he's been taught about us.
We need him to set aside his own fears
and stop and help us in our need.
We need our enemy to be moved by pity for our suffering.
Only once we have begun to identify with the one in the ditch,

– the one who is weak, and hurting, and in great need –
 only then
 can the message of this parable
 start to work within us,
 to bring us to a new place of compassion and radical generosity.

And yet, this story is so old.
 Yes, it's beloved and well-known,
 but in a way,
 its very familiarity can rob it of its power.
 It becomes just another nice story.
 Today, we name hospitals and food banks
 after the Samaritan in this story.
 We lose sight of just what a radical, gut-churning, cringe-inducing
 story this was when Jesus first told it.
 Maybe we need a new story.

At the time Jesus told it,
 This story was meant to instruct a certain lawyer,
 a lawyer who gave the right answer
 when Jesus asked him what the law had to say
 about what is necessary to inherit eternal life.
 He knew he was supposed to love God
 with all this heart and soul and strength and mind.
 The loving God part, he got.
 God is easy to love.

Where this lawyer got a little foggy
 was around the *other* person we are commanded to love:
 Our neighbor.
 Like any good lawyer, he knew
 that the more narrowly one defines one's terms,
 the less likely they are to create unintended consequences down the road.

The fewer people the term “neighbor” applies to,
 the fewer people we actually have to take into account.
 It's sort of like putting a citizenship question on the census.
 That could scare away an awful lot of so-called “neighbors”
 who are already living in fear as it is.
 The fewer people who fill out that census,

the fewer neighbor we must take into account
when we divvy up electoral votes.

You see, that's how a lawyer thinks.
But Jesus wanted this man to stop thinking like a lawyer,
and start seeing things the way God sees them.
God's definition of "neighbor" is not narrow.
It is very, very broad.
God's definition of "neighbor" is "everybody."

That's who God wants included
in the list of people I am commanded to love,
and to show compassion to,
and to protect when they are in danger,
to go to the mat for when they are in trouble,
to spend my time and my money and my resources on,
when they are in need.

Naturally, if I'm thinking like a lawyer,
I'm going to make that list as small as possible.

I have the sense that Jesus is turning his gaze
from the lawyer in the gospel story this morning,
and is looking at me, at us,
as we try to insulate ourselves a bit,
to remove us from being liable
for the well-being of absolutely everybody.
That's not realistic, we want to shout.
We cannot be responsible for the whole world,
the lawyer in us cries out.

The story Jesus told that lawyer
was about a priest, a Levite and a Samaritan
and a wounded man on the road to Jericho.
It was a story grounded in the day-to-day
concerns and prejudices of 1st-century Palestine.

I wonder what story Jesus would tell me,
would tell you,
so that we would understand

that the answer to the question about who is my neighbor
is “everybody.”

So that I can see clearly that loving God
is not just a private matter,
between God and me,
but goes hand in hand with my willingness
to accept responsibility for the well-being of absolutely everybody,
and to also understand that I need them,
just as much as they may need me.
Because one day I may be in the ditch,
and I may be surprised at who comes along to help me,
and who passes by on the other side.

How would Jesus get me to see
that my neighbor is in detention at the border?
My neighbor is being rounded up and deported this weekend.
My neighbor is being swallowed up by a flood this weekend.

And not only that,
but my neighbor is being victimized by guns and violence.
My neighbor is afraid of police pulling him over for a broken taillight
that somehow leads to him being shot.
And my neighbor has failed to pay child support
and has skipped a few visits to his probation officer.

My neighbor has been protesting outside the ICE detention facility,
and my neighbor has been attending Trump rallies.
My neighbor lives in a mansion in Cherry Hills,
and my neighbor has to scrounge for food in our little Gleaner’s pantry
just to keep from going hungry today.

My neighbor watches the same news channels,
reads the same publications,
and believes pretty much the same things as me.
And my neighbor agrees with me on absolutely nothing.
Still my neighbor, still need to look out for his or her best interests.

What story do we need to hear
for us to know
that our wounds have been washed with healing wine

and soothing oil,
and been bandaged with care,
and we have been brought to the inn of hospitality and compassion
where the living God has promised to look after us?

What story will convince us
that doing likewise,
that treating everybody with the compassion shown to the man in the ditch,
IS the love that God yearns for?

What story could Jesus possibly tell us?
Whatever it is,
our community, our nation and our world
desperately need to hear that story.
We need to hear it, so that we can really live it,
with all our heart and all our soul
and all our strength and all our mind.
So that we can choose love over fear.
What story, Jesus?
Amen.