

July 11, 2010
Year C
Luke 10:25-37

Most of us know this story, this parable, The Good Samaritan. We understand the questions that the lawyer asked Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” We need to remember that Jesus was a strong Jewish person of faith and he replies in the manner of his faith with, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” The lawyer answered, quoting the law, “You shall love God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself.” Jesus said, “you have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.” The story continues with the question, “Who is my neighbour?” And then we have the parable, the story. And the story ends with Jesus saying, “Go and do likewise.” (Read the story again) So, who are you in this story?

I suspect that most of us place ourselves in the parable as the Good Samaritan.

We see ourselves as good Christian folk always willing to help out. We would place ourselves in the story as the one stopping and looking after the injured man. I doubt that most of us would be the ones that walk by – most of us don't place ourselves as the one in the ditch. A few of us might be the lawyer asking the questions.

I want to share two stories with you:

The first one takes place in a city in Saskatchewan where a young woman and her partner and their three children lived and the Mom and kids attended a small local United Church. One evening the home where she lives experiences an explosion and there was extensive fire damage. The story made it to the front cover of the newspaper and the story involved illegal firearms and drugs. The people at the church of course recognized the names of this family and some of them insisted on helping out. There was some choice as to what was needed and one of the needs was that all of their clothes required laundering.

And so, they came and gathered up all of the clothes in the house. And after they had laundered them they also mended and sewed on buttons and did anything else that needed done concerning the clothes. They returned the clothes to the family and of course the Mom was grateful but she never again attended church. It was just too big; the reaching out of those well meaning generous people was just more that she could cope with. She didn't

know how to be grateful enough; she couldn't face them Sunday after Sunday knowing she owed them.
They didn't mean to come across that way – but charity is a tricky matter.

At a rural church where I worked there was a young man who wanted to attend Summer School at a local college and he had a long history of alcohol and drug abuse. He attended church fairly regularly and he was friendly and easy to like. The Board, after a long discussion, decided to support him in this endeavor, so they paid his tuition, which came to about \$700.00. He attended school that summer and I spoke to him once after he returned. He said it was the best thing he had ever done. But he never came back to church. I'm not sure why, maybe for some of the same reasons as the woman in the other story never returned, or maybe he knew that we knew that he was continuing to drink and use drugs. Charity is a difficult process and being the Good Samaritan is not easy.

Biblical scholar, Amy-Jill Levine, suggests that we think about this story, The Good Samaritan, from the perspective of the person in the ditch and then ask, "Is there anyone, from any group, about whom we'd rather die than acknowledge? Or, is there any group whose members might rather die than help us?"

So, imagine for a moment that you are the one in the ditch. Would it matter how that healing, caring, saving moment happened?

It's probably crucial to be able to put oneself in the ditch and then ask just how is it that we want to be saved. Do we want the one who saves us to know who we are? What sort of a relationship do we want with this person? No relationship at all, you might say.

But are you sure? Is it better to keep a safe distance between the victim and the ones we are saving? That way we don't become too attached. Or if the opportunity presents itself we might be willing to develop a relationship with the victim.

If you were using the food-bank would you want the workers there to willingly hand out food from the food-bank and not ask questions? Our system has become one where that isn't much of a possibility. Most of us want to know why people are in need before we will support them. Most of us won't rescue the woman in the ditch if we know she is drunk or stoned.

And many have a long list of reasons why we shouldn't help that woman in the ditch.

So then, how do we read this? When are you the Good Samaritan? And how do you decide when not to be the Good Samaritan? When is it that we say and believe that we can "go and do likewise?" Because it is when we can really believe in that line "go and do likewise" that we put ourselves in the ditch as the victim.

The following story is an interesting one: Harriet Tubman is supposed to have carried a pistol, which she pointed at the heads of runaway slaves who started to have second thoughts on the way North. Presumably this had much to do with ensuring the safety of others in the group, but at least a part of her action may have been motivated by compassion for the faint of heart. I don't necessarily see her compassion as ironic.

There are far less desperate situations where the only helpfulness that seems to make much sense involves putting a gun to someone's head and marching him away from his bondage of choice. But did Tubman ever wonder at the contradiction of forcing someone to be free? Did she ever ask herself if it was worth risking her life and liberty on behalf of people who apparently desired their liberty less than she did? If she asked, we know her answer. She would have said, along with Albert Schweitzer, that her life was her argument. But are we willing to call her a Good Samaritan too?

Are we willing – and this is how we test the sincerity of our answer – to conclude an account of her life by saying, "Go and do likewise," including the part about the gun?

I remember the congregation who washed and mended the clothes and some said, why are we washing and mending clothes for a drug dealer, an illegal firearms dealer?" I have worked in lots of food banks and in my experience food banks provoke the most questions. I hear some say, "Are we giving food to people who don't want what we give them," or I hear others say, that people simply abuse food banks. If you were on the receiving end, if you were the one in the ditch asking for food, what would you want the model of charity to look like? How would that read?

I believe this is one of the most difficult stories in the entire Bible because I believe that how we learn to deal with the dynamics surrounding charity is extremely complicated. But, for myself, and I've been at this a long time, I've learned some hard lessons.

But, I do believe that when I am involved in acts of charity I must learn to put myself in the other person's shoes, I must learn empathy. And most crucial of all, I have had to learn not to be judgmental.

And so the question I ask about the clothes I washed and mended is, what did I learn about myself as I washed and mended that families clothes? What did I learn about myself when I agreed along with others to send a young man to summer school, knowing that the outcome was uncertain? What do I learn about myself when I offer food to the hungry? My sense is that we learn more when we are able to get way down in that ditch and explore what that's like. And I don't ever pretend that getting way down in that ditch is easy. I believe that piece is hard work. But if we are ever going to function within the model of what we (the church) call charity, then that needs to be our starting point. Then with some integrity we can be the one to show mercy and we can say, "go and do likewise."

In the midst of all of what I've just said I think we still must ask, Do my actions connect to creating a more justice seeking society? So, in the end, has what I've done created awareness for me, the charity giver, and have we all as Christians involved in charity learned something about creating the kingdom in our midst?

On my settlement charge in northeastern Saskatchewan I encouraged and established a food bank at the church where I was settled. It wasn't easy work and there was lots of resistance. And it was at this place that I learned much of what I know about charity.

Most of our clients were First Nations people along with some single parents and people from other surrounding towns and villages. As I did this work I discovered that things went better if the people coming to get food could pick the food they wanted to eat.

One morning a woman asked if she could have three boxes of pasta because she was feeding families from a few different homes – sort of a drop-in-center where people could gather and eat.

Then we tried to have a good supply of food for this particular woman keeping in mind that she was cooking in large quantities for children and adults. We developed a relationship where she could ask for what she needed and we responded in ways to fulfill her needs. She was able to get up out of the ditch and hopefully in this process she empowered others. Children went to school with lunches and came home to dinner.

Other women helped her cook. It became a community on-to itself. And our church community became a different sort of community where we focused on the needs of this developing group of women who were looking after their people.

Endings. The piece that causes me the most angst are endings.

What do we think? Where are we at now?

I still believe this is a difficult story.

But maybe this week whenever we are tempted to judge we could practice getting down in the ditch with the hungry and with the drunk and with those who have way less than we do and we could find ways to show mercy so that deep in our hearts we can say

“Go and do likewise.”

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