

Love Unconditionally

Part 1 of Sermon Series:

Action Required

a sermon based on

Luke 10:25-37

and prepared for

July 14, 2019

5th Sunday after Pentecost (Year C)

at

Cherry Valley United Methodist Church

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NOTE: Although much of the information in this sermon was preached, on July 14, the actual sermon delivered was an abbreviated version.

In the Gospel lesson today, Jesus tells a story. A man going down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho is ambushed by robbers and left half dead. (Lk 10:30) He was left *half dead*. All the translations I found rendered it that way. It doesn't say that he was left "for dead," or even imply that he seemed dead. Keep that in mind.

Jesus continues the story saying that a priest coming down that road, saw him and passed on the other side. I've heard the argument that the priest couldn't stop. In Numbers 19:11-14 we hear in the Law that those who come into contact with – or even enter the tent in which there is – a dead body will be unclean for seven days (there's a prescription for being purified). Understand – when the Bible speaks of being unclean – it doesn't mean someone is unfit for human association, but only that aren't allowed to participate in the worship life of the community. (It's more nuanced than that, but that's the general principle.) So the argument goes, the priest on the road may have been on his way for service in the temple. People were counting on him for the sake of their souls. He couldn't risk being unclean for seven days. Besides that, according to Leviticus 21:1-2, a priest was never to allow himself to come into the presence of a dead body unless it was a close relative: one of his parents or his children, his brother, and his sister only if she were an unmarried virgin. The priest couldn't risk it.

But the first part of that argument goes away immediately. Jesus tells us that the priest was going down the same road. When you're on a road that goes to or through Jerusalem. You go "up" toward Jerusalem; and you go "down" away from Jerusalem. North-south-east-west doesn't matter. Uphill or downhill doesn't matter. The priest was heading away from Jerusalem. Second, the man wasn't dead. He wasn't even "mostly dead." (those of you who know "The Princess Bride" will get the reference.) He was half dead. That means he was beaten so badly that without help he would die, that there was no way he could recover on his own.

So there goes that excuse. What does the priest do? He goes to the other side of the road. I don't know whether you stayed to the left or to the right of that road. Scripture doesn't say; and it doesn't matter. However, even without definite laws, there are long standing customs that people follow about road travel. It just makes sense so that there's not confusion when you meet someone coming the other way. So not only does he not help he goes out of his way to avoid helping.

The same thing happens with the Levite. Although not a priest himself, he was a member of the priestly tribe and had to stay pure. The passage may not say that he was going "down" the road but I think the word "likewise" confirms that he was. He too, "passed by on the other side" (Lk 10:32).

Now here, the lawyer who asked the question, "trying to justify himself" about whom was his neighbor, probably expects to hear, "Then came an Israelite," because that was how these stories go when rabbis explain things; and the Israelite would be the hero. Instead, he hears that "a Samaritan while travelling" (We don't know if he's going up or down the road) a Samaritan takes pity on the man. We just heard the rest of what he did and the details aren't important to the point I'm trying to get us to.

The priest and Levite had no real excuse. The priest and the Levite even went out of their way to avoid helping. We presume – and I think the man who challenged Jesus did too – that the man left for dead was a Jew; but the Scripture never says that. The entire parable implies that a child of Abraham should tend to the man. A Samaritan could be excused. Not only because he was a despicable Samaritan, but because the injured man might even think himself defiled by the Samaritan's touch. But he does it.

Let's go back a bit. Why did Jesus tell this story? Do you remember how the passage began? The lawyer – we're really talking about a religious leader here not an attorney – the lawyer asks, Jesus what he must do to be saved. Jesus asked him what the law said. To which the man replied, "To love God with all your being and to love one's neighbor as oneself." (That's a paraphrase. But that's it right.) Jesus says, "You got it. Do that and you will have life."

Then we hear, “Wanting to justify himself...” Did you catch that part? The man wasn’t just trying to clarify things. He wasn’t just having a spirited conversation with Jesus so that others could learn. He was trying to find a loophole. It’s almost as if he asked, “Who don’t I have to love?” or “Whom am I allowed to ignore?”

He’s not the only one in Scripture. In Matthew 18, after Jesus gives that command to go to your brother or sister and straighten things out so that you can forgive one another it says, “Then Peter came and said to him, ‘Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.’” (Mt 18:21-22)

Jesus stressed that point. In Luke 17,

“Jesus said to his disciples, ‘Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to anyone by whom they come! It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble. Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive.’” (Lk 17:1-4)

Let me tell you story that I read this week when I was trying to wind down from a long day of class. The story takes place in a trailer park sometime in 1993. Several of the people in the park have pets: dogs or cats. You know what they say about dogs and cats. Right? They don’t get along. Many of us can think of homes with dogs and cats, b u there’s usually some sort of introduction and other things going on. Even dogs and cats that live in a home with the other species are usually not fond of – let’s call them – outside the family animals.

One of the cats in this community was a roamer. Miss Kitty (Seriously, that was the cat’s name.) was known to walk around the trailer park and to go home when called. That’s probably how Miss Kitty found herself pregnant. Sadly, when Miss Kitty gave birth, all of the kittens died. Even the vet couldn’t provide a reason other than “sometimes it happens.” Miss Kitty seemed depressed.

Meanwhile, a cocker spaniel in the park, Smoochie gave birth to a litter of puppies. But Smoochie didn’t seem to care. She tended to ignore the puppies. Her owners thought that they just needed to wait it out and give some time. But the puppies weren’t thriving. Some had even seemed to disappear.

Then another neighbor noticed something. Miss Kitty was acting strange. Instead of her normal roaming around the trailer park, she was just going back and forth into an empty trailer. Then he noticed that each time she returned to the empty trailer she had something in her mouth, that looked like an animal.

You’ve probably guessed where this is going. When Miss Kitty’s owners and the other neighbors looked into the vacant trailer, Miss Kitty was hiding in a corner surrounded by puppies. Miss Kitty because of her recent pregnancy was able to nurse them, and the puppies with her were growing healthy.

Here’s the thing. For those puppies being cared for by a cat, was not going to turn them into cats. But Miss Kitty became a mother dog by caring for those puppies.¹

¹ I’ve found two versions of this story with different details at <https://en.newsner.com/animals/neighbor-sees-cat-stealing-newborn-puppies-takes-closer-look-realizes-shes/> and https://www.jerusalemonline.com/view/stole-puppies-from-dog/?src=outbrain&utm_source=outbrain&utm_medium=003224b26dba467cc735afc49dd498b03e&utm_campaign

What was Miss Kitty's motivation? She had this impulse to be a mother... to love and to nurture. Those puppies became the outlet.

The Samaritan on that road wasn't trying to make a good Samaritan out of the injured man. He just did his part to help that man live and to be healthy. He didn't go down that road looking for someone to help. He just helped the man who needed it at that moment, because he had that impulse to love God and to love his neighbor..

We can offer lots of explanations for not helping other. (Notice I didn't say excuses). Maybe we're too busy. Maybe we have needs to tend to in our own family. We should be taking care of our own families and our own faith community and our own towns. That is okay. We need to be wary of preachers who our love only counts when it's directed toward strangers or that that sort of love is better. It's not.

But we are called to love unconditionally. Whenever and where ever we find ourselves confronted with a need, Jesus asks us to offer the best we can in that moment. In defining the marks of a true Christian, Paul says, "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers." (Ro 12:9-13)

Jesus outdid us all in showing honor. Didn't he? Unlike the priest and the Levite in the story who went out of their way to avoid helping the injured man to avoid defiling themselves or maybe even out of real concern for their own safety, Jesus faced the religious authorities head on knowing that he would die so that we who were half dead might find life.

We don't offer love to convert anyone. (That's Jesus' job) As we hear in Hebrews 13, "Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." (Heb 13:1-2) But mutual love, don't forget that part.

This is not an "us or them" thing. Our faith requires action. Not out of compunction, but out of our transformation and the life we've received. AMEN