

“Traits of a Good Neighbor”
Luke 10:25-37

The sermon title was developed from the gospel lesson two days before the tragedy that occurred Thursday night in Dallas, TX. Pastors who stand in pulpits on a Sunday morning on behalf of Jesus Christ are charged with the responsibility of sharing with people in the pews the power of the gospel and the grace of good news. This morning is no different other than to say that our gospel lesson appears rather timely in light of recent events in Baton Rouge, Falcon Heights and Dallas.

In response to a question about eternal life, Jesus confirms the necessity of loving God and loving one’s neighbor, and then launches into a parable about a man on the road somewhere between Jerusalem and Jericho where he is beaten and robbed. Left for dead, a priest and Levite pass the victim by walking on the other side of the road, rendering no aid or assistance. It is a Samaritan, a person of ethnic background despised by the Jewish community who stops in order to care for one who was wounded and in need.

And Jesus asked, “Which of the three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” The answer is simple and straightforward, “The one who showed him mercy.”

The events of Baton Rouge, Falcon Heights and Dallas illuminate situations filled with poor judgment, anger, violence, and a lack of mercy. Cities and small towns across America are becoming more politicized and polarized as families mourn and communities sort out what is happening in our homes, in our neighborhoods, and in our streets.

In the words of Robert F. Kennedy on the night that he announced the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., “This is a difficult day and a difficult time for the United States. It is perhaps well to ask what kind of nation we are and what direction we want to move in. We can be filled with bitterness, and with hatred, and a desire for revenge.

We can move in that direction as a country, in greater polarization – black people amongst blacks, and white amongst whites, filled with hatred toward one another. Or we can make an effort to understand and practice compassion and love.

And then Robert Kennedy shared a text from the poet Aeschylus: Even in our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart, until in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God.

What we need in the United States is not division; what we need in the United States is not hatred; what we need in the United States is not violence and lawlessness, but love, and wisdom, and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or whether they be black. So I ask you to return home, to say a prayer for the family of Martin Luther King, but more importantly to say a prayer for our own country, which all of us love, a prayer for understanding and for compassion.” This, I believe, is the prayer of a good neighbor, one who cares for others.

And the Psalmist cries out to the Lord in time of tension and trouble, “Rise up, O God, judge the earth; for all the nations belong to you.” (Psalm 82)

Knowing that judgment awaits us all, we look at the events of Baton Rouge, Falcon Heights, and Dallas and form in some cases very strong opinions to which the Apostle Paul cautions us, “May you lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God.” (Col. 1:10 ff.)

The Samaritan in the parable captures the spirit of the gospel and the actions of the Samaritan speak to the Christian to Christian communities of faith today. With respect to the ills of the world, we cannot allow ourselves to wash our hands from personal involvement nor can we afford to make the mistake of walking on the other side of the road avoiding opportunities to help, to bandage wounds, to provide space for care and respite, and negotiate places of sanctuary for the wounded. In the eyes of Jesus, these are some of the significant traits of a good neighbor that make a difference in a world filled with tragic violence and spiritual apathy. A good neighbor practices situational awareness, sees needs that exist around him/her, disregards personal convenience, ignores assumptions and stereotypes, and responds to particular needs through a ministry of presence, and acts of kindness and unconditional love. This is how the Christian, in the name of Jesus Christ, shows mercy.

We have lost a champion for ethics and morality in the death of Elie Wiesel, a survivor of the Holocaust, a practicing Jew, writer, teacher and philosopher. He watched his father suffer from debilitating dysentery in a concentration camp and experienced personal shame in not having the power to prevent his death. As much as Elie Wiesel through the years supported the state of Israel, he also lived with the tension of advocating the Jewish State and her right to exist all the while knowing the depth of suffering for his Palestinian neighbors. In his marvelous book “And the Sea is Never Full,” Elie Wiesel challenges us to face difficult times such as this by gathering around tables, exchanging ideas, learning from one another just what it is that makes each of us unique, with the ultimate goal of understanding why and how we must live together on this bedeviled planet.” (page 220)

In light of Jesus Christ and his message of the gospel, it is imperative that the Christian voice engage in this conversation and dialogue at the table. We cannot allow ourselves to be consumed by a destructive passion to withdraw from the problems of this world, closing our doors to people who are different. The world is too small and growing smaller. If we are to find a way to live on this bedeviled planet, we cannot afford to encounter a neighbor and his or her problems and pass by on the other side of the road.

The scope of Jesus Christ and the message of the gospel is much broader. In the words of Paul, we have been rescued from darkness and transferred into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption and the forgiveness of sins. (Col 1:13) Jesus said to a person standing in front of him that acts of mercy and involvement in the care of a neighbor is a necessary part of the Christian life. May our prayers offered tonight and tomorrow be prayers for our country and for our leaders, and may we pray for understanding and the courage to show mercy when a neighbor needs our help. Amen.