

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, Sunday, July 14, 2019, Year C

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Luke 10:25-37

“Love Your Neighbor as YOURSELF”

The more I think about this Scripture reading, this Holy Gospel – I am feeling like it is a “press conference.” Can you picture a press conference today – and I don't care who it is that is being asked questions – but there are what we call “gadflies” – there are people in the crowd who want to ask questions to make themselves and their media look good. Now as a member of the media – I have to say that I understand what they are doing, because it is a very competitive business but it doesn't mean that I like it. Now think about someone who is in the crowd, asking questions to pointedly get a response that they want – OR to trap the person that they are asking the question to. In today's Gospel, a scholar of the Torah, a lawyer, comes to Jesus and asks a very pointed question: “*Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?*” Jesus exquisitely asks this man to tell Him exactly what the Law says. The man replied directly from his extensive knowledge of Scripture: (Luke 10:27) “*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, “*Love your neighbor as yourself.*” These words are very familiar to us – as we pray them at the beginning of each Holy Eucharist service.

Jesus told him, “*You have answered correctly, do this and you will live.*” But the scholar of the Torah just wasn't satisfied with this and wanted to make himself look good – and so he asked Jesus: “*And who is my neighbor?*” This scholar fell right into the place that Jesus could use him best. In the region – there is a road that leads up to Jerusalem – and these people who were listening knew it well, and probably traveled it quite often. Jesus used this to make His point.

I would like you to picture a winding narrow dirt road, only about as wide as a car, one car, in the Judean wilderness. This was the desert; rocks and sand were everywhere, along with steep cliffs and very deep ravines. This road runs from its lowest part, at Jericho, which is about 1,000 feet below sea level, going up, and climbing to its highest part – 18 miles away – up to the city of Jerusalem – which sits at about 2,500 feet above sea level. Let me tell you - this road is not only treacherous, but the threat of robbers and bandits popping up at any time – was well known and feared. And so Jesus, in His infinite wisdom, used this because they would be able to plug right into it. Its valley goes through what is known as the ‘Wadi Kelt.’ A *Wadi*, or *Vadi* is a dry riverbed that can gush with water during the rainy winter season, and this particular Wadi is known for its steepness and barrenness. This is the example that Psalm 126:4 speaks of the “*dry riverbed,*” “*streams,*” or “*watercourses in the Negev*” (depending on your translation) – and this may well be David's model for his vision of the 23rd Psalm's “*valley of the shadow of death.*” To stand on the cliff and look at this – you get the picture!

In June of 1999, it was the very first trip that we made to Israel, my wife Marilyn, our children John, Theresa, and I, (Marilyn and I also went and led a trip in July of 2014 – just before coming to visit St. Andrew's for the first time – we got to see this close up – it has changed quite a bit in 15 years) were riding in a tour bus that climbed that very road from Jericho up to

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Jerusalem. There were many steep drops on each side of the road. Everyone on-board the bus sat perfectly still; because we didn't want to tip the bus one way or the other. Our driver, stopped at a very deserted spot, and we all, very carefully got off the bus, to check out the remarkable view of St. George's Monastery, on the other side of the ravine – which was built into the mountain. This isolated, deserted spot – became, in just a few moments, over-run with Bedouins trying to sell us Kaffiyehs (the traditional Arab headdress – think of Yasir Arafat), souvenirs and trinkets. A place where people could come out of nowhere, and be virtually everywhere, and then disappear just as quickly – this was certainly not a safe place! We all got the point that Jesus was making in this Gospel – this place was NOT a safe place.

Remember – this is a story – there is no man that this is happening to – Jesus told this as a story, an illustration. It could very well have happened, probably many times that someone got robbed and was left. It is really funny, because when we were on the trip, riding on this road – some people were asking 'where did the Good Samaritan happen?' We had to tell them – maybe somewhere on the road. There is a place called "the Good Samaritan Inn" - a touristy thing. The story that Jesus told began with a man heading DOWN this road from Jerusalem towards Jericho, when he was robbed, beaten and left for dead. We know nothing more about this man except that he was naked, penniless, and near dead. First century or twenty first century – that is not a good state to be in! This man was apparently just an innocent victim!

Can you just picture that Jewish priest, coming directly from the Temple he is liturgically clean, heading down that road. He sees the injured man, and he wanted no part of this man – and so he deliberately moves to the other side of the road. Can you just hear him now? "I am not going to get involved!" "I don't recognize him; he is probably dead anyway!" "If he is a Gentile, I could become unclean – and if he is dead – then I am even more unclean!" And so he left quickly and quietly.

A little while later, along comes another servant of the Temple – a Levite. His reaction is very similar- going to the other side of the road. His objections might have been quite the same. "I could become unclean, besides he's naked, he's not someone I know, and 'he sure looks dead to me!' And- what if the guys who did this are watching me, ready to jump me? He is not my problem."

Can you hear this going through someone's head? Here were two men of God, who "*left God*" behind at the Temple. Apparently mercy is something they ask for, but not something they give. "He couldn't be my neighbor – besides, he's not my responsibility!" This poor innocent man lying on the road was the neighbor of both the priest and the Levite. They just couldn't see it.

So Jesus continued with His parable – introducing someone, whom many Jews of that time would consider to be their sworn enemy – a Samaritan, who didn't avoid the poor victim, but instead "*he took pity on him.*"

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- Not just pity, but a great deal of mercy as well, with absolutely no thought of himself and the risk of his own ritual impurity – or for his safety.
- He didn't take the time to consider the neighborhood he was in, and the fact that if someone came along – he might be grabbed as suspect #1 – after all “he was a hated and reviled Samaritan!”
- This Samaritan was willing to risk it all to help preserve the life of another human being.
- He gave the man the best first aid that he could, with bandages, oil and wine, and then he put the man on his own donkey. He was thinking about this man and not thinking of only himself.
- He took great time, care, and expense – paying in advance for the innkeeper to care for this stranger, and promised to cover any other expenses when he came back along this way. Apparently he knew the innkeeper and was familiar with this trail.

This Samaritan that Jesus told about, recognized someone in need, and didn't ask who this was, but instead he became this victims' neighbor – and he took full responsibility. Remember, Jesus used well known people, types, and this treacherous road to make His illustration clear.

As so, Jesus returned His attention to this man, the Scholar of the Torah, and the press conference. This man is waiting, ready to jump in and so Jesus asked him, which one of the three was the neighbor to the victim? The man answered: “*The one who had mercy on him.*” He didn't say “oh, the Samaritan” but instead he said, “*The one who had mercy on him.*” He had gotten the message. He didn't see him out of cultural eyes, or religious eyes, but for his compassion and mercy. Jesus replied to this man: “*Go and do likewise!*”

Jesus was showing him, and through the words of Luke's Gospel, showing us, - that you need to understand the needs of your neighbors in order to become a neighbor. In order to define what a neighbor is – you must first become a neighbor – even if they are your sworn enemies.

Jesus Christ, who in His own great mercy, freely gave His life on the cross, in each one of our places, so that we can have forgiveness of our sins, and the promise of spending eternal life with Jesus, Himself. Do you realize that He became our neighbor – seeing in each one of us, neither friend nor enemy, but the incredible value and high regard of each individual life. When you look in the mirror in the morning – do you see yourself the way God sees you? Do you realize just how precious you are to Him? Seriously, we try to get each hair in place, we are shaven, ladies – you do your own stuff. Do you see what is behind all of that? The person that God loves so much – that He gave His life for! That is a hard thing to think about – you are precious and there is something that each of us needs to do first – before even trying to love others, and that is to realize the love that Jesus has for us – and then probably the hardest thing of all – we have to love ourselves! You have to like yourself, and then love yourself. That can be very hard for some people. You are precious – you are special!

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Jesus' own example shows us love and mercy, God gives us mercy all the time instead of hatred and fear. He simply asks us to do our part, showing compassion to all – both physically and spiritually. He purposely replaces enemy with neighbor, and He calls us to do the very same thing. You see, our enemies are our neighbors, and they are our responsibility! We have been called, by Jesus Christ, Himself, to “love our neighbors as ourselves” and that means even “Love our enemy as ourselves!”