

Homily Pentecost 8C  
July 10, 2016  
Grace, River Forest

Deuteronomy 30:9-14  
Psalm 25:1-10  
Colossians 1:1-14  
Luke 10:25-37

### On a Risky Journey

In Jesus' name. Amen

Jesus is on his journey to Jerusalem. We already know the purpose of that journey and how it will end. Along the way, Jesus is taking every opportunity to teach his disciples. When they entered a Samaritan village and the villagers did not receive Jesus, his disciples wanted to reign down fire on them. But Jesus rebuked his disciples; he had come to give life to the world, not destroy it. He sends out 70 disciples – not just the 12 we usually hear about – “to every town and place where he himself intended to go.” The 70 return with joy, and Jesus is blessing them when a lawyer, an expert in the law of Moses, interrupts Jesus to ask a question, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Perhaps we might have questions like that sometimes. “Is this all there is, God? What can I do to experience a fuller and more complete life, here as well as in the hereafter?” But the thing is, Luke tells us the lawyer’s search for eternal life is not authentic, but a question like those of the devil in the wilderness – meant only to “put Jesus to the test.” But Jesus refuses to play the lawyer’s game. He

asks the lawyer to answer his own question: “You want life? What is written in the law?” And, of course, the lawyer knows the answer: “You shall 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 your neighbor as yourself.”

“Yes,” Jesus responds, “you have the right answer; do this, therein is life.”

The lawyer has been hoisted on his own petard. And so, he asks another question, wanting – Luke tells us – “to justify himself.”

“And just who is my neighbor?” he asks Jesus. This question of the lawyer’s is as self-serving as his first one. He asks the question because he is hoping to get Jesus to set limits, to define exactly whom he was required to love, and, more importantly, whom he could skip – because of ethnic or geographical or other considerations. “Surely,” for example, he thought, “my neighbor could not be a Samaritan!” One Lutheran seminary professor has written that in local congregations, “Prolonged debate, or referral to committee, is the time-honored method” of avoiding loving the neighbor we don’t want to love. (Frederick Danker, *Jesus and the New Age*, p. 131) We have surely seen again this week how the color of one’s skin can mean that some bodies matter, and others don’t, and then how a sniper can leave white police as the victims shot by the side of the road. Will this all never end?

Instead of answering the lawyer's question, of course, Jesus tells the story of a risky journey. It was risky for the man who was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, because bandits ruled the roost on this desolate, dangerous road, something like gangs controlling the streets on the south and west sides of Chicago. And sure enough, the traveler in this story fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and left him "half-dead," by the side of the road.

It was a risky journey also for the two Jewish religious leaders who "by chance" were going down that same road from Jerusalem to Jericho. We could easily condemn them for being "curved in on themselves," Luther's definition of sin, for not stopping to help their Jewish neighbor. Perhaps the priest and the Levite both hurried by because they believed the beaten man must have been a sinner, if God had let this happen to him. Sometimes we, too, today, myself included, have a tough time loving certain people because we judge them sinners, or blame the victim for the situation they're in. Preacher/Prof. Fred Craddock says: "While [the priest and Levite's] behavior was certainly not commendable, neither was it without reason. The body on the roadside could have been a plant by robbers to trap a traveler. And certainly contact with a corpse would have defiled the priest and the Levite and disqualified them from their temple responsibilities. When they saw the victim, theirs was a choice between duty and

duty. So understood,” Craddock says, many of us might recall similar choices we’ve had to make between one duty and another. (Craddock, *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, Luke*, p. 151)

But a third person comes down that dangerous, risky road from Jerusalem to Jericho, in Jesus’ story. It is a person Jesus’ hearers would least expect to stop and help an injured Jewish traveler, their ancient enemy, a Samaritan. But the Samaritan does stop, pours wine on the Jewish man’s wounds to disinfect them, puts on oil as salve, and bandages him. Then he transports the wounded man to an inn, and himself cares for him that night. He gives the innkeeper two denarii to take care of the man – enough for approximately two months lodging in an inn at that time – and promises to repay the innkeeper for “whatever more he spends.” The Samaritan covers all the costs.

At the end of the story, Jesus turns the lawyer’s question around – not *who* is my neighbor, but who on that risky journey was *neighbor* to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?

The lawyer, unable to get the hated word, “the Samaritan,” out of his mouth, said, “The one who showed mercy, that’s who was neighbor.” And Jesus says to him, “Go and do likewise.”

I have read some wonderful stories of people who have shown mercy. A Palestinian family whose young son was killed by Israeli soldiers while holding a toy gun, whose parents donated his organs to six Israelis, including a two-month-old infant. The Palestinian mother said, “My son has died. Maybe he can give life to others.” (James A. Wallace, *Feasting on the Word*, “Homiletical Perspective,” p. 241) And Muslims who shielded Christians when Al-Shabaab, the local terrorist group, attacked a bus in Kenya. The “gunmen ordered Muslim passengers to come out of the bus and separate themselves from the Christians, but the Muslim passengers refused. They gave Christian women on board their [headscarves] and helped others hide behind bags” on the bus. They told the gunmen, “If you want to kill us, then kill us. There are no Christians here.” And the gunmen left. (“Muslims shield Christians when Al-Shabaab attacks bus in Kenya,” AnnieRose Ramos, CNN, December 22, 2015)

Someone has said that the parable of the Good Samaritan “is a story for people who recognize that they are on a journey.” (Wallace, *ibid.*, p. 239) That would be us. I think it would also be safe to say that most of us tend to be risk-averse. So how can we ever “go and do likewise” – like the Good Samaritan, like that Palestinian family, like the Muslims on that bus in Kenya? How can we show multi-faceted mercy without limits or partiality? The parable reveals that knowing

the right Biblical answers, knowing what we *should* do, is no guarantee of our doing the right thing, of our not passing by on the other side when we see a neighbor in need. Human behaviorists tell us that we “are more likely to *act* our way into a new way of being, than to *think* our way into a new way of acting.”

This is the secret that Jesus knew when he told the parable of the Good Samaritan in the first place. That whenever we lean attentively toward any of the world’s wounded, whenever we care for the ones Jesus places in our paths, somehow it is we ourselves who are healed and transformed.

And the only reason any of this is possible for us, of course, is because of the most risky journey of them all, the one *our* Good Samaritan first took from heaven to earth on our behalf, to “lean attentively” toward us beaten, half-dead people. While all the characters in this parable Jesus told were headed down from Jerusalem to Jericho, Jesus himself was heading in the opposite direction, up this desolate, dangerous road, to the holy city of Jerusalem, knowing full well what awaited him there, a risky journey to the cross and tomb, carrying and burying our infirmities, our curvature in on ourselves, to raise us up in his death and resurrection to a new life of compassion. In our baptism we are commissioned and equipped by Christ to care – until he comes again – for those he brings to this inn of Grace and into our own daily lives.

Today and every Sunday morning we turn to a table set before us for our own healing and strengthening and forgiveness. Just like at that other inn, this meal was arranged by a Good Samaritan – one bearing the full cost of it all, with his own body and life blood. We come to the table robbed of different things, at different times in our life. We come with wounds sometimes hidden, sometimes raw and open. We come to this table because there are times when everywhere else in our lives we feel forgotten, beaten, left by the side of the road. But we never come to this table alone, and we surely don't leave it alone.

Our Good Samaritan Jesus sees to that himself.

In Jesus' name. Amen