July 14, 2013 – 8th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 10)

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Today's Gospel contains one of the most well-known parables in the entire New Testament. Along with the parable of the Prodigal Son, the story of the Good Samaritan is one of those that even the most casual Bible readers could describe if push came to shove. Interestingly enough, both the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan are only found in Luke's Gospel, and not in the other three. The jury is still out about where these stories came from, but at least in the case of the Good Samaritan, I think this might be in there to illustrate Luke's intention of appealing to a more universal audience of both Jews and Gentiles.

So since this is such a familiar story, is there anything new about it that we can look at? Maybe we try to pick it apart a little to see if there is anything enlightening other than what we already know, which basically comes down to, "be nice to strangers in need."

In some ways it parallels the Prodigal Son story, or rather the Prodigal Son story parallels this one, since it comes later in Luke, so it might be interesting to compare the two. Both of these stories have three main actors. They both have a character who is in dire need in some way. We know why the prodigal son is in need – he spent all of his money on wild living. But we only know that the robbery victim was robbed and left for dead in a ditch. We don't know who he was, or why he was travelling, or even if he was a Jew, and that's important.

Both have a character or characters who are traditionally cast as the villains of these stories – the prodigal son's brother and the Levite and the priest. I don't know that it's really fair to think of them as bad guys or antagonists, but they do possess more traditional attitudes. These are characters who look at the world in terms of black and white and right and wrong. They represent what many view as the prevailing opinion – the opinion that "everyone knows." There is a rigidity in these characters that we've come to associate with being in the wrong, but in both stories those characters do nothing that we could blame them for if we weren't looking at them through the lens of the third character.

The third character in each of these stories is by far the most interesting. The father of the prodigal son and the good Samaritan make choices that are contrary to what we would think of as human nature. They are selfless and generous. They go above and beyond to help the person in need, and do it cheerfully and extremely thoroughly. They both are looked at less than favorably both by characters in the stories and by Jesus' audience, both ancient and modern.

The Samaritans, for instance, tend to show up a lot of the time as the boogie men in the New Testament. Just a couple of weeks ago we heard about a Samaritan village who wouldn't receive Jesus because he had turned his face toward Jerusalem. The enmity between the two peoples began at the time of the Assyrian conquest of Israel in the 8th century BCE. The Jews considered them heretics and outside the Torah, and the Samaritans considered the Jews to have fallen away from the true Israelite religion while they were in the Babylonian Captivity. During the time of Jesus, this bitter racial hatred was in full force in Palestine.

So Luke takes this character, who by his very being is tainted in the eyes of the Jews, and turns him into the hero, in order to make a point with the lawyer who was questioning him. Let's take a second and talk about this lawyer. The Greek word for lawyer here is *nomikos*, which means keeper of the law. The word *nomos*, or law, is also used for the Torah, so this lawyer was not the kind that you'd see in court, but rather he was an expert on Jewish Law. This same person might be called a scribe, in the other Gospels, especially when coupled with Pharisees.

Our tradition, at least as I remember it growing up, is to ascribe a bad motive to this lawyer – for instance that he is trying to trick Jesus into saying something wrong. While this is definitely the case of the scribes in the other Gospels, remember that Luke has Jesus consorting with all kinds of people that we used to think were firmly in the "bad guy" column, such as Pharisees and Romans. It's just possible that this lawyer doesn't deserve all the bad press.

So if we take this conversation at face value, this expert in Jewish law is questioning Jesus, possible in the common practice of making sure that anyone who was teaching the Torah had the authority to do so, and he asks the fundamental question, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" His manner of addressing Jesus as Teacher, and the respectful way he asks his questions seems to indicate that he was not antagonistic towards Jesus, but rather was seeking to learn from him.

Then, after Jesus turns the question back on him, he follows up with the singing, dancing question, "Who is my neighbor?" This is the crux of the matter. This is question that we should be asking every day. We all know that we should love God and love our neighbor, but just who IS our neighbor. Who is that person or people that we should love as ourselves?

In Jesus' illustration of the actions of the good Samaritan, he shows both the lawyer and us that our love for our fellow people should transcend race, ethnicity, culture, tradition, and maybe even personal safety. It's an all-encompassing love that enfolds the entire human race in its arms. It's the love that God has for us, and that Jesus had for us when he became one of us for a time on earth. It's the love that you hear proclaimed from pulpits and altars all over the world on Sunday morning.

But there's another kind of love going on here, too. One that's not as obvious and greeting-card worthy. Let's say, for the sake of argument, that the robbery victim in today's story was a Jew. If he wasn't out cold, he might not even blame the Levite and the priest for crossing the street to avoid him for the sake of their own priestly purity. It was the law, after all. But, if we were a Jew, he would not only be mightily surprised to have a Samaritan stopping to help him, he might have also been offended. To him, this would be like a Hatfield stopping to help a McCoy.

Is there anyone out there that we'd rather NOT help us in our moment of need? Is there anyone who is so outside the pale that just having him touch us would be somehow wrong? I don't know for myself right offhand, but I imagine that there could be someone like that for each of us. And that's what makes Jesus' story so radical here. The lawyer who was just testing his knowledge of the Torah got way more than he bargained for!

The kind of love for neighbor that Jesus is talking about is not merely being tolerant of, or nice to those around us. It's actively pursuing a relationship with them. It's going out of our way to help, even if it means great sacrifice. But it's also receiving that help and reciprocating that love, even if it means forming relationships with the Other, whoever that may be.

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And these relationships are not fleeting, fly-by-night things. They are enduring and long-term. Jesus is talking about breaking out of our stability and risking everything for someone else.

Just as he did.

It's not easy. It can be uncomfortable and stressful. It can cost time and money and social capital. And relationships are not always neat and tidy – they can be really messy sometimes, and the deeper we are in them the messier they get. And there is a real risk that our current relationships within our traditional cultural framework may suffer, at least temporarily.

But Jesus is clear. Cross that road. Pick up your wounded brother and carry him to safety. Shoulder his burdens as you would your own. Even the lawyer, probably one of the most traditional people of his faith, felt the strength of Jesus words when he asked, "Which of the three was a neighbor to the robbery victim?" and couldn't help but reply, "The one who showed mercy."

But also, if you're the one in the ditch, reach out and grab the hand that's being offered to you. Don't turn your back on people just because they aren't like you. Allow them in.

There's a lot of division in the world today, especially in the wake of the Zimmerman trial that ended yesterday. Mercy and tolerance seem hard to come by. So it's up to us, the Body of Christ, to turn the mercy shown to us by God in his Son out into the world every chance we get, and to form relationships with those we encounter.

Don't let us get so caught up in our traditions and our culture that we either don't see those in need all around us, or worse, cross the street to avoid them. And don't let those same traditions and culture blind us to others who are reaching out to us. Let us love profoundly and radically, just as our Savior loved us first. Our neighbors – ALL our neighbors – need us now more than ever.