

**Grace Episcopal Church  
Galena, Illinois  
July 14, 2013 – Proper 10C**

**The Rev. Dr. Gloria G. Hopewell  
Text – Luke 10:25-37**

This morning, less than a day after the verdict has come in acquitting George Zimmerman of either murder or manslaughter in the shooting death of Trayvon Martin, the news and social media are spinning. Facebook, Twitter, and definitely preaching websites as preachers wrestle with their sermons – is it to be a rewrite? A tweak or two? Or best left for the Prayers of the People. For no matter whether you agree or disagree with the verdict, it is impossible not to recognize a direct and heart-breaking application to today's gospel--what is arguably the most familiar (or at least one of the top two or three) of Jesus' parables. The one we now call the parable of the "Good Samaritan."

It seems that just about everyone--those who are churched, who learned this story back in Sunday School and those who never darken the door of a church know at least that title "Good Samaritan" even if they don't know the whole parable. And for most, it means doing a good deed for someone in trouble.

Not that there's anything wrong with that. But it does show a downside to familiarity. This parable has been reduced – its meaning diminished. It has been domesticated, its scandalous nature scraped away, as it has been buffed and polished into a nice little moral tale.

Yes, this parable would have been a shocker to those in Jesus' time and to Luke's audience. The words "good" and "Samaritan" would not have appeared in the same sentence. For many centuries, the Jews and Samaritans had despised each other for various ethnic and cultural reasons--to say nothing of their differences in how they worshiped God. Had Jesus intended just a nice little moral tale, there would have been no need for someone like this--the third person encountering the beaten man could have been anyone. But Jesus put a Samaritan on this road between Jerusalem and Jericho--this narrow, steep road lined with caves that provided perfect hiding places for bandits and thieves. This road that presented enormous danger to those who "belonged" in Jewish territory let alone a despised outsider.

And Jesus made this Samaritan not just a traveler on a treacherous road but the hero of the tale--in direct contrast to two others, a priest and a levite, both temple leaders, who we would expect to have stopped to help one of their own who was in distress. But both of them passed by on the other side of the road. And the Samaritan was the one who stopped.

But let's back up just a bit. Let's look at the context in which Jesus was offering this

parable. Luke tells us that Jesus was responding to a question--a challenge, really--from a lawyer who wanted to know how he could be assured of eternal life, of being included in God's kingdom. This lawyer, of course, in that time and place, would have been an expert on the law of Moses--the Torah. So, he was a biblical scholar. Let's look at the dynamics of the conversation. Jesus didn't answer the lawyer directly. He used a rabbinic technique (like the Socratic method) of answering a question with another question, trying to draw out an answer from the questioner. He said, "you've studied the scriptures. What do you make of this?" The lawyer's answer was exactly the right one--by loving God and neighbor is needed for eternal life, what Jesus called elsewhere the summary of the whole law. Jesus acknowledged the rightness of the answer and said, "So you know what to do. Now, go and do it."

And that, friends, is where the rubber hits the road, at least for me. We, too, know the summary of the law, what we call the Great Commandment. On the surface, it seems so simple. Loving God and loving neighbor. Sure. Loving God with everything in you--heart, soul, strength and mind. And loving the neighbor as yourself. Just how do we do that? Every Sunday we confess that we don't know. We confess our sins against God and neighbor: "...we do not love you with our whole heart. We do not love our neighbor as ourself..."

The lawyer seems to want to set some limits, to "size" this command so that he can deal with it: "who, exactly, is my neighbor?" he asks. Just how far does this thing go? Just give me a formula please. Which kinds of people do I really need to love as myself?

As we think about the magnitude of problems, of human misery and need around us, we might want to do the same. Who must we include? What is enough? Is it enough if I buy *Streetwise* from a licensed vendor and pass by the hungry homeless man who stands in the crossroads with his cardboard sign every day? Is it enough if I give blankets and gloves to those on the street but do not invite them to share the warmth of my home? Is it okay for me to lock my car doors or go to the other side of the street when I see a group of guys in hoodies? Or to stand my ground with a gun when I feel that my turf is threatened?

I can easily sympathize with the lawyer. It is more comfortable and much safer to stay in the realm of the mind and knowledge of the law than to move to the heart, to the "doing" and living of Jesus' commands. It is easier to go through our rituals in the safety of our sanctuary or our private prayer space than to take our faith to the highways and byways of our weekday lives--to the streets that are unfamiliar. For it is here, face to face with one another and with the stranger, that formation becomes discipleship, where discipleship shapes and reshapes formation.

Jesus doesn't answer the lawyer's second question directly either but instead tells the shocking story. And we see that the priest and the levite are not so different from the lawyer. They have drawn their lines, set up their boundaries, whatever they may be (their fear of also being beaten by bandits, their hurry to get to an important appointment, the inconvenience of needing to go through a purification ritual if they touch a bleeding body...). And it takes the most unlikely person, the despised outsider who is not included,

to break through, to get down in the ditch to minister to the dying man.

At the end of the story Jesus flips the lawyer's question. It is no longer "who is my neighbor?" Now it is "which of the three *was* a neighbor?" The lawyer can't even get the word "Samaritan" out of his mouth. Instead he says, "the one who showed mercy." And Jesus says, "Go and do likewise." Go and *be* a neighbor. Live out what you know and believe. Even when you're on a dangerous road, out of your comfort zone, among those who are strangers or hostile enemies. Do not be content with the letter of the law, with justice alone. Go and show mercy.

Our collect for this morning says it:

...receive the prayers of your people, and grant that they may know and understand what things they ought to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to accomplish them...

And Moses, in our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures, reminds the people one last time before they enter the Promised Land, to stay faithful, to observe the law:

Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away.... No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe."

In your mouth—to tell the story again and again, with all its scandal. And in your heart—to go and do likewise. Go to spread loving kindness and mercy to all just as each of us has freely received from our merciful God. May it be so.

Amen.