

Luke 10:25:37

July 11, 2010

Collateral Grace
A Sermon by Beverly A. Zell
Given at Hope Church, RCA, Holland, Michigan

Without a doubt, the story of the Good Samaritan is one of the most widely known of all the parables Jesus told. Its hero has inspired poets, artists, sculptors and lawmakers. Hospitals, churches and charitable groups bear his name—or at least the title we have given him. Preachers, teachers and scholars have interpreted, re-interpreted and misinterpreted the story until one wonders if there is anything left to say.

Now lest you think this is where the sermon ends, let me add that I think far too often we try to tame the story, to reduce its message to that of simply being a good neighbor. I want to avoid that this morning so let's briefly review the context in which Jesus told this story.

The world of Jesus' day had rigid social and religious boundaries that segregated people into sharply different categories. Judgments were made and labels applied such as pure and impure, saint and sinner, male and female, Jew and Gentile, well and sick, whole and broken, clean and unclean, rich and poor. If you were on what was thought to be the righteous side of those divisions, there were rules that dictated how to stay that way and one of them was to keep your distance from people and things that were labeled unclean or impure.

Jesus comes into this rigid, black and white world with a different vision of what life should be. He taught and practiced a way of life that said God is radically inclusive. God's love knows no boundaries. And that if we are to love as God loves then, like Jesus, our way of life should be radically inclusive too. Instead of building barriers we should break them down.

In our gospel lesson this morning, Jesus paints a picture of what that life looks like. And it's that radical inclusivity in this story that I celebrate and yet I also wrestle with how to fully practice it. This morning I invite you to wrestle with it too.

On the eve of his assassination, Martin Luther King spoke out in support of striking sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee. His now famous speech makes reference to this parable.

You know the story. A man traveling the treacherous road between Jerusalem and Jericho is beaten, robbed and left for dead. Two different religious types

pass by, a Levite and a Priest. They see the man and cross to the other side, presumably out of fear either for their own lives or more likely fear of violating their purity. Some time later a Samaritan, who is an outcast, comes along and, moved with pity, he ignores all the boundaries and responds compassionately.

As King tells the story, he imagines two different questions the characters ask themselves as they make a decision regarding what to do about the situation. The priest and Levite ask, “*What will happen to me if I get involved?*” The Samaritan reverses the question and asks “*What will happen to this man, if I don’t get involved?*”

Human nature being what it is, I suspect these are the kind of questions most of us ask ourselves when we move beyond our comfort zone to respond to someone in need. It’s understandable that sometimes we will respond like the Levite and at other times like the Samaritan.

But lately this parable has raised a different question for me. Lately I’ve been wondering “*What happens to me spiritually when I keep my distance from those suffering injustice?*” Is there collateral damage like some glancing blow that inflicts a spiritual wound? Does it scar my heart, leaving me hardened to feelings of compassion? Is it possible that it dims my vision so that I see the truth of oppression less clearly? Does it rob me of a deeper relationship with God, myself and others?

Recently I was listening to an interview with author, physician and activist Dr. David Hilfiker who was a guest on the radio program, *Speaking of Faith*. He spoke about the growing racial and economic segregation in our nation. He noted that one-quarter of the residents of major metropolitan areas live below the poverty line, and that number is even higher for African-Americans and Hispanics.¹

He went on to say how easy it is for those of us who are white, educated and affluent to isolate ourselves from the stark realities of poverty. He observed that few of us really know people who are poor. Many of us don’t live in the same neighborhoods. We don’t get together for dinner, shop in the same places or hear to one another’s stories.

In fact, for many of us, much of what we know about those who are impoverished is what we see on television or read in a newspaper or book, all of which enables us to remain isolated and yet still feel informed about the problem.

Hilfiker applauds the charitable and social justice work being done by countless Christians in churches across the country. But he believes there is

¹ Krista Tippett, “Seeing Poverty After Katrina,” *Speaking of Faith*, American Public Media, 2006, Radio.

still something missing, which is real relationship. He wonders how effectively we can address the issues of race and poverty without that missing piece, without getting closer to the problem, without building relationships.

Jesus said that when the Samaritan saw the man he “came near him.” He touched him. He dressed his wounds. He lifted his bloody body from the roadside. He offered words of comfort. He ignored the pain of his own wounds caused by years of hatred and prejudice. In short, he crossed the chasm of race, religion and class to befriend a stranger. And Jesus tells us to go and do likewise.

Mother Teresa once said, “The poor will heal us.” For some time now I’ve tried to flesh that out in mind. Where am I in need of healing, and does my relationship to the poor accomplish that? As I wrestle with such questions, I’m reminded of the passage in Matthew where Jesus says that whenever we feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, visit the prisoner we are showing compassion for him.²

Could it be that when we get close enough to see, to touch, to tend the wounds of those beaten down by injustice that Christ is present in the intersection of our lives? Perhaps it is in that act of compassion that we encounter grace, the healing grace that not only mends our wounds, but transforms them. Amen.

² Matthew 25:35-45