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July 14, 2019
The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

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

I am typically not a big fan of familiar parables. When they come up in the lectionary, I often cringe on the idea of preaching about them. Because more often than not, we come at these familiar parables thinking we already know the answer or the lesson they have to teach.

The Good Samaritan for instance...That story of the man left on the roadside, robbed, beaten, broken. He is passed over by a priest and a Levite (the upper class, the educated, the acceptable folks of society). And then a Samaritan comes along and stops to help. Not only does he stop to help, but he bandages the man's wounds, puts the injured man on his animal and takes him to a nearby inn where he pays for his stay and care.

Let me ask you this....who is the "good" person in this story? I know that may seem like a silly question...the answer is in the title, right? But, why is the Samaritan good? Or, for that matter, who are the bad guys? We might even venture to ask, who is the irresponsible person in this story, because we always need someone to point a finger at.

My guess is that you have answers for all of those questions. The Samaritan is good, the priest and the Levite are bad. The man beside the road is either irresponsible or just at the wrong place at the wrong time. Those are our typical labels.

Now...if you were to embody this story, who would you be? My guess is that we would say we want to be the Samaritan. The Good One. After all, isn't that the lesson, to help the stranger, to do the right thing when no one else will? Yeah...that's me, we think to ourselves as we give ourselves an imaginary pat on the back.

Well, that's one approach to the parable. In fact, it's probably the most popular interpretation. The one that teaches us right from wrong. The one where we can point to our good deeds and feel personal satisfaction that we are making a difference.

Here's the challenge...I am not sure that we are the Samaritan and I'm not sure we would want to be. I'm also not so sure that the greater lesson in this parable is the help that the Samaritan provides.

Maybe the person we should consider, maybe the person we actually are is the person on the side of the road...injured, alone, desperate for help. Waiting for someone to come along and pull us out of the ditch we have found ourselves in.

Now remember, the Samaritans were the lowest members of the society. They were of a different ethnicity and religious practice from the larger community. They were loathed, hated, disregarded. They were even excluded by a formal edict of entering the Temple in Jerusalem. In other words, the Samaritans were best to be avoided.

So here we are in the story. We are lying beside the road and the one person who stops to help is the one person we don't want to see, the last person on earth we would want to help us. That one. The one no one likes, the one no one understands, the outcast. And so we say to ourselves, please God, not that one. And yet, that is the one person who reaches down to us, in the time of our greatest need. And guess what...when they reach down, we have to look up. We have to look up and into their eyes, this person whom we have avoided for so long.

It is something so unexpected that it calls everything we once thought into question. All of our perceptions, all of our prejudices, all of those dark places within ourselves. The people who we have looked away from over and over again. And, here they are helping us. And like it or not, we have to notice.

Now, if you are thinking - I wouldn't be that judgmental. I don't hate anyone and I certainly wouldn't ignore someone's needs. I am better than that. Well, if that's what you are thinking, I want you to think again.

Who are our Samaritans today? Let's be honest, we all have them...the people we hope never to interact with, the people we don't want to see, the people we don't want to sit too close to or talk to on the street...the homeless man who smells because he hasn't had a bath in weeks; the foreigner who looks different and talks different and believes different than we do; the black teen who looks like he is up to no good so we walk to other side of the street; the woman who lost her job and can't pay her bills and asks you for help one too many times; the refugee who is desperate for a new life so that he can feed his children. I could keep going on but you get the idea.

When we look closely at our own hearts, we all have a Samaritan in our lives who we would rather avoid. We have been taught lessons of exclusion, lessons of who is in and who is out. We have learned behaviors and perceptions about others who are different from ourselves whether we want to admit it or not.

And so our parable asks us...What do we learn on the side of the road? Who might we see for the first time, in all of their humanity and in all of their God given goodness? How can our hearts shift when our Samaritan reaches down to us?

Somehow the Samaritan finds compassion and mercy for those who have pushed him away over and over again. He finds forgiveness and reconciliation. He finds hope and grace in the midst of whatever pain as been inflicted upon him. That's powerful.

For us, the ones who are on the side of the road, we are called to take the Samaritan's hand and look. Really look so that we can begin to acknowledge our perceptions, our judgements, our barriers that we have built to keep others out.

And then we are called to learn...to learn from the Samaritan's ability to rise above the careless actions of others to show greater mercy, greater grace, greater love.

Think about it. Experiencing this kind of love and acceptance from the one person you would rather avoid. Yet, this is the same person who cares for you unconditionally.

If anything, the Parable of the Good Samaritan is about the transformation that happens on the roadside. It's about our ability to set aside our differences and to accept grace in unexpected places and to offer love in return. So let me encourage you to spend some time on the side of the road. Acknowledge those places in your heart where you have excluded others. Seek God's wisdom to grow. Open your heart to taking someone's else's hand.

Amen.