



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### **Pentecost 5 – Proper 10 (C)**

#### **Paying the Price of Mercy**

**[RCL] Amos 7:7-17; Psalm 82; Colossians 1:1-14; Luke 10:25-37**

There once was a run-down coffee shop in a neighborhood that was known for being dangerous. One day, an Episcopal priest came in to get some coffee on his way to somewhere else. He sat down to wait, busying himself with the paper, not paying attention to a man in the opposite corner who was clearly the worse for wear and crying silently. Just as the priest's order was ready, in walked the church warden. The two shared a lively greeting and conversation as they waited for the warden's coffee, with no acknowledgement of the man in the corner who had put his head down in his arms and was heaving with sobs. In fact, as they were leaving, they commented to one another, "What is with that guy?" just as the next customer was coming up to the door.

The customer was a young woman with short, spiky hair dyed in a rainbow of colors, heavy black make-up on her eyes and lips, wearing all black, with piercings in her eyebrow, lip, and several in her ears. The priest and the warden gave her a wide berth and both thought to themselves, "What's with kids these days?" as they left the parking lot to get to their next destination.

The young woman came in and immediately noticed the man sobbing in the corner. She was moved with compassion. He didn't look good – he had a black eye and what seemed like blood matted in his hair, and he was of a different race. There was no one else around. The barista was doing something in the back and the priest and the warden had departed. She sat down across from the man and stated the obvious, "It looks like you're having a hard time," and added, "May I buy you a cup of coffee?"

The man looked up with bloodshot eyes and saw a face looking at him with caring and concern, nothing else. She was the only person that had spoken to him in all the time he had been there that morning. She got some paper towels from the bathroom and a cup of water from the barista, as well as the man's coffee, and cleaned off his wound while he drank and told her his story. The young woman realized quickly that he had been mugged and proceeded to help him contact the police, as well as buy him a gift certificate for the coffee shop so he could order whatever he wanted for the next couple of meals. She gave him some bus tokens that she had so that he could get to his job so he wouldn't get fired, and called him at his work later to make sure that he was on the mend.

The man wanted to pay her back, but she refused and wouldn't let him know where to find her. The young woman told him that she was a neighbor and that's what neighbors do. He told her that he had never seen her in his neighborhood and thought that her understanding of being a neighbor was broader than his. She laughed good-naturedly and told him he was right, wished him well, and hung up the phone. The man sat back with amazement.

The distressed man was amazed and rightfully so.

As we hear this modern re-telling of the Good Samaritan story, it can cut us to the quick. Sure, it's full of stereotypes, but there is a grain of truth to each caricature, and we have all been in each character's shoes in one way or another. We have all been asked by God through circumstance to expand our vision of what it means to be neighborly. Like the people who would have heard today's gospel story in Luke's community, we have boundaries and rules that we live by. In the Jewish culture of that time, there were rules about how men should treat women, parents should treat children, Jews should treat foreigners, Jews should treat gentiles and Samaritans, and so forth. These systems set up a social order where certain positions of power and privilege were well maintained. Their society was not so different than ours is now over 2,000 years later. We have those systems in place, and they are difficult to escape or transcend.

Yet, this is precisely what Jesus was calling the people of his time to do, and it translates to ours.

Inheritance meant tangible goods back then – land, wealth, herds. It was the promised reward to Abraham and his descendants who belonged to God's covenant. The Israelites were a covenanted people, and over time, the message of inheritance also included a future age to come.

But Jesus has a different message. Eternal life was congruent to living a life in God's kingdom, with its boundaries and not societal ones. Jesus turns the lawyer's challenge around to show that God's sovereignty is over one's whole life. Reading and knowing the law is not enough. Loving God, your neighbor and yourself characterizes someone who is already living life in the kingdom. The promise of inheritance is now attached to a demand: "Go and do likewise."

The lawyer told Jesus that the one who showed mercy was the injured man's neighbor. How do we go about showing that kind of mercy in our own lives? The kind of mercy that does not expect any kind of reward or perk. The kind of mercy that has no boundaries, as Jesus so cleverly identifies in his parable. The kind of mercy that often has a steep price: being beaten for defending a defenseless person; losing money to help someone else get back on their feet; losing a job because you stood up for a colleague who was being treated unfairly; being the victim of vandalism after standing up to neighborhood bullies on behalf of an elderly neighbor. The list can go on.

We all know these types of stories and must ask ourselves if we are willing to pay the price of mercy or just walk on by.

Being a true neighbor means that we are living actively and not passively in the kingdom of God.

In today's epistle reading, Paul tells the Colossians that he and Timothy are praying for them so that they "may lead lives worthy of the Lord ... as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God." Our faith journeys take a lifetime.

We are asked in our Baptismal Covenant, "Will you proclaim by word and example the good News of God in Christ? Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself? Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?" The answer is always, "I will, with God's help."

We cannot do this alone, and it is clear our work is never done. We continue to ask Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" and Jesus continues to answer with results that should not surprise us, knowing how Jesus works, but they always do: the marginalized one, the different-colored one, the one with a different culture, the old one, the young one, the one missing all her teeth, the one with the flashy car, the one who is us. What is surprising is how difficult it is to show mercy to those who do not fit in our boundaries, despite what we know Jesus is asking of us.

Living a merciful life is not defined as helping someone once. Instead, it is a life in which a person's character is formed by the basic premise that they love God, love their neighbor, and love themselves. To put it another way, Mahatma Gandhi was once quoted as saying:

"Your beliefs become your thoughts,  
Your thoughts become your words,  
Your words become your actions,  
Your actions become your habits,  
Your habits become your values,  
Your values become your destiny."

The call to go and do likewise is challenging and transforming. Living out mercy changes us as a people. May we be blessed with God's own mercy and grace as we strive to walk worthy of God's calling in our own lives and communities.

*This sermon was written by **the Rev. Danée Ashley** for Proper 10 (C) in 2013.*