

An All-Too-Familiar Story

Proper 10, Year C – Luke 10:25-37

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, July 14, 2013

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and send it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

This morning's Gospel reading starts off like nearly every passage of Jewish commentary. This sort of question/answer give and take was the normal way of learning from rabbis, teachers of the *Torah*, the Law of Moses. So the lawyer, the *expert* on the Law, asks the young itinerant preacher, this upstart from the Galilean hills, this *would-be* rabbi – he asks him one of the most basic questions of the Law: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus, being perhaps not quite as much of an upstart as the lawyer had supposed, does what every good rabbi always does. He answers a question *with* a question: “What does the Law say?” The lawyer knew that one was coming, so he fires back the standard answer, a combination from the book of Deuteronomy and the book of Leviticus: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus dismisses this particular student, “That's right. That's *all* you've got to do. Just figure out how to do *that* and you're all set.” I can just picture him giving the poor guy an indulgent half-smile and turning to the next student, “Next question. Yes, you there, in the back with your prayer shawl on crooked.”

But like any student hung hanging out to dry, this lawyer isn't about to be left standing there with everyone whispering behind their hands, thinking that he just asked the dumb, obvious one. So before he has to sit back down, he gets in a follow-up question: “Just who is this neighbor that the law says I must love?” And instead of continuing the question/answer session, Jesus turns to the *other* form of teaching for which rabbis were and are famous – he tells a story. It's a story we have all heard a *thousand* times. It is so familiar, in fact, that it has made its way into the stained glass of most churches, including *ours*, and even into the very secular language of our culture. *Everybody* knows what you mean when you say, “Good Samaritan,” and most could make a *reasonably* good stab at repeating the story we just read.

The problem is that we've all heard the story so many times that perhaps we don't really *listen* anymore.

Last night, a cold November night in 1938, it had been the shouting in the streets, the flying rocks and the sound of breaking glass. The gang had smashed in the shop windows. What merchandise they hadn't stolen, they had destroyed. It was all Rachel could do to keep her husband from rushing downstairs to fight off the attackers. She knew that if he went downstairs, he would most likely not be back.

This morning it had been the children. Shortly after Joseph and Joshua had left for school they returned home — their faces bloodied, their clothes torn, their books stolen. The only thing on them that had been left intact were the yellow stars that they all had to wear now.

As night fell once more, they crept outside. One suitcase each, containing a few meager belongings, was all that spoke of the life they were leaving behind. A neighbor had told them of a farm out in the country where they could get new papers, and offer them a chance to escape. But where would they go? Where would they find protection? Who would take them? Hopefully somewhere the children did not have to live in fear, because of their religion and their heritage. Hopefully somewhere her husband could get a job, *any* job. Hopefully somewhere they could settle and rebuild their life, without the color of their skin and hair making people walk on the other side of the street. Hopefully somewhere *free*. Incredibly, for *six million* human beings, even that small hope was never realized.

We've heard the story before. Just ask the Kurds, or the Hutu, or the Croatians, or the garment workers of Bangladesh, or the slave-soldier children of Uganda. The problem is that we've heard the story so many times that perhaps we don't really *listen* anymore.

At about 3 a.m. on a warmish March morning in 1964, Kitty finally returned to her quiet residential neighborhood from the uptown bar she managed. She parked her car, and began to walk the thirty yards through the parking lot to her front door. Noticing a man at the far end of the lot, she paused. When he started toward her, she ran, but the man caught and stabbed her. She started screaming for help.

Lights went on in the building across the street. Windows opened. One man called out, "Leave that girl alone!" The attacker shrugged and walked away. Windows closed and lights went out. The man returned and attacked the girl again. She screamed *again* – even louder. This time lots *more* windows opened and lots *more* lights went on. The assailant walked toward his car, leaving the young woman to crawl along the street to the stoop of the building where she lived and somehow managing to drag herself inside. The attacker returned a third time, found his victim in her home and killed her.

During those three separate attacks over the course of thirty-five minutes, no one tried to intervene. Of the more than thirty people who saw at least one of the attacks, of the thirty people that heard her screams and pleas for help, of the thirty neighbors that stood behind their bolted windows during the attack, not one of them called the police. After much deliberation – and a phone call to a friend for advice – one man finally urged another neighbor to call the authorities. The Police, they say, arrived within two minutes of the call. But by then, it was too late for Kitty Genovese.

We've heard the story before. Just pick up the paper, or turn on the TV, or log in to your computer for a dose of the evening news. The problem is that we've heard the story so many times that perhaps we don't really listen anymore.

Last week over lemonade at coffee hour, or perhaps a few weeks ago at breakfast, there is a newcomer at church. She has a thick foreign accent. Her clothes are disheveled, like she *slept* in them or something. As you approach, you discover that she also *smells* none too fresh. She holds her cup of coffee with two shaky hands as she stands by herself in the corner. Since you know you're *supposed* to greet visitors, you talk to her for a few minutes. And in that time, Mary tells you *her* story.

She was on her way east to reach family. Her older model car was doing okay until she stopped for a bathroom break and to buy a pack of cigarettes and couldn't get it started again. To get it running again took some part you've never heard of, and all the cash she had left. Now, here she was on a Sunday morning, having spent the night trying to sleep in her car in the Wal-Mart parking lot. She has no money, no food, no place to stay. Since it was Sunday, she came to church to pray, and hoping that she might meet someone who could help her.

You think about it, but then you begin to feel a little angry. Why hadn't she planned things better? What sort of itinerary from California to Massachusetts goes through Henderson, Kentucky? Why had she just had to have cigarettes – she had money for those! And why had she chosen to tell her whole story to you? What do you really know about her? Why should you take a chance? Trying to decide which of the excuses you've already thought of you will use, you excuse yourself to refill your cup and pick up a cookie. By the time you are ready to leave, the woman is talking to someone else. And yes – she's leaving with *them*!

We've heard the story before. The problem is that we've *lived* the story so many times that perhaps we don't really listen anymore.

"Who in the story," Jesus resumes the rabbinical question/answer session, "who in the story was a neighbor to the man in trouble?" The lawyer gives the answer that is obvious to

everyone sitting there: “The one who showed him mercy.” Perhaps, just perhaps, the proverbial light bulb finally goes on above the poor student’s head. “The question isn’t so much who is my neighbor?” he realizes, “but how can I be a neighbor?” “Love is not defined by who the neighbor is,” he realizes, “The neighbor is defined by the love that *I* am willing to give.”

And Jesus dismisses the class with their assignment – and ours: “Now go – and do likewise.”