

“Who is My Neighbor?”

Proper 10, Year C – Luke 10:25-37

preached by the Rector at St. Paul’s, Henderson, July 10, 2016

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and sent 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, the answer you have heard over and over again over the years: “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.”

But like any student left hanging out to dry, this lawyer gets in a follow-up question, the *same* follow-up question, as a matter of fact, that *I* got a couple weeks ago when Paul quoted the same Summary of the Law: “Who is this neighbor,” the lawyer asked, “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, a story we have all heard a *thousand* times, and know so well.

So early in the week, I had started to craft a story of my own that might tell that old familiar story in some new way. And then, my Face Book feed began to blaze with stories of another shooting in Minnesota, and then another in Louisiana, and then even *more* in Texas. And then, just yesterday, I received an email from the Bishop. The Canons of the Church provide authority to the bishops from time to time to issue a Pastoral Letter on points of doctrine, discipline or worship, and to require the Clergy to read such a Letter to the congregations of the diocese. Bishop Terry’s email yesterday was such a Pastoral Letter, and with today’s Gospel reading especially in mind, I obediently – *and* gladly read it for you this morning. The Bishop’s Letter begins with a quote from the Prayer Book’s baptismal liturgy:

We receive you into the household of God. Confess the faith of Christ crucified, proclaim his resurrection, and share with us in his eternal priesthood. (BCP p. 208)

Beloved Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

I write to you following the unholy hate and racism, violence and death experienced in our nation these last weeks, with the killings in Orlando, St. Paul, Baton Rouge, and Dallas weighing especially heavy on my heart. Also weighing heavily is the truth that I *must* do more in response.

In the liturgy of Holy Baptism, once the candidate has been baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and then anointed with the oil of chrism, sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ’s own forever, the people of God welcome the newly baptized with the promise stated above.

Throughout the history of God’s people, priesthood, both in terms of the ministerial priesthood and the priesthood of all believers, has been marked by sacrifice, the sacred act of

rendering to Almighty God an offering. Sacred stories and writings in the testaments of the Holy Scriptures describe how both individuals and the faith community make such offerings. The history of the Church is filled with moments of sacrifice, as well as journeys unfolding over years that were filled with sacrifices offered to God. The promise that God makes to us is that every genuine act of sacrifice brings God's vision for creation closer to being realized on earth.

For disciples of Christ Jesus, faithful authentic sacrifice creates change in heart and mind and action. The Holy Eucharist is such a sacrifice, for in and through the Church's sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, the sacrifice of Christ is made present and we are united to his one offering of himself. (*BCP p. 859*) In the words of one Eucharistic prayer: *And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, our selves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto thee. (BCP, p. 336)* And in another Eucharistic prayer the power of the sacrifice is proclaimed with the words: *Deliver us from the presumption of coming to this Table for solace only, and not for strength; for pardon only, and not for renewal. (BCP, p. 372).*

Sacrifice. What am I willing to offer...? No, what *must* I offer, what does the life and death of my Lord and Savior, what does my faith in Jesus Christ *require* that I sacrifice, in order to be changed so that through my participation in the life and mission of his Body the Church, the reign of God is built?

The sacrifice of Christ on the cross has defeated the power of death, our greatest enemy, freeing us to confront sin in every form, no matter the apparent or actual cost. I am a sinner, saved by God's grace.

Racism is a sin. In order for me to help build God's reign, I know that I must confront racism in my heart, in my life, and in my vocation. I must sacrifice privilege and power and control that enables racism, and with God's help, transform the tools and means I have, in order to build the reign of God, that equally honors the image of God in *all*, respects *equally* the dignity of *every* human being, and creates justice and safety and peace.

I ask for your prayers and help that I might have the faith and courage to offer such authentic sacrifice, and know of my prayers for you and for our diocesan community as we seek to make God's vision a reality now.

May the Lord who has bestowed upon us his eternal priesthood in Holy Baptism, who nourishes us with his Body and Blood, give us the grace and power and holy *courage* to live faithfully *and* sacrificially.

Yours in Christ's love,
The Right Rev'd Terry A. White
Bishop of Kentucky

I never finished that story of my own that might tell that old familiar story in some new way. Perhaps in three years, when this Gospel reading comes 'round again, things will be more settled. Or maybe in six years...

But yesterday, just before I got the Bishop's letter, I read a story on Face Book from a young woman of color named Natasha Howell that I think might answer that lawyer's question:

So this morning I went into a convenience store to get a protein bar. As I walked through the door, I noticed that there were two white police officers (one about my age, the other several years older) talking to the clerk behind the counter (an older white woman) about the shootings that have gone on in the past few days. They all looked at me and fell silent.

I went about my business to get what I was looking for. As I turned back up the aisle to go pay, the older officer was standing at the top of the aisle watching me. As I got close he asked me "How are you doing?" I replied, "Okay, and you?" He looked at me with a strange look and asked me, "How are you *really* doing?" I looked at him and said, "I'm tired!" His reply was, "Me too."

Then he said, “I guess it’s not easy being either of us right now is it.” I said, “No, it’s not.” Then he hugged me and I cried. I had never seen that man before in my life. I have no idea why he was moved to talk to me. What I *do* know is that he and I shared a moment this morning, that was absolutely beautiful. No judgments. No justification. Just two people sharing a moment.

She ended with the hashtag: #Foundamomentofclarity

“Who in the story,” Jesus concluded his so-well-known story, “who in the story was a neighbor to the man in trouble?” The lawyer who had asked the question in the first place gives the answer that is obvious to everyone sitting there, and everyone who has heard the story since: “The one,” he said, “who showed him mercy.”

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