

The Rev. Steve Best
St. Thomas Church 7.14.19
Pentecost
5C Deut. 30:9-14; Col. 1:1-14; Lk 10:25-37

Please Don't Hurry!

This morning we engage with one of the most famous of Jesus' stories: The Parable of the Good Samaritan. From the beginning of Christian history, this simple, yet profound story, that captures the core of Jesus' social ethics, has inspired countless sermons, paintings, sculptures, poetry, novels and films. Innumerable hospitals, churches, and charitable institutions also bear its name. We even have Good Samaritan laws to protect those who in good faith attempt to help those in urgent need.

It's engrained in the very fabric of our Christian mission—to help others and especially those who are the most vulnerable. St. Thomas' long-standing support of Congregations for the Homeless is a wonderful example. Our participation in this ministry is our own version of the story of the Good Samaritan: to offer food and shelter to men who have been beaten up by the callousness and injustices in our society and so often are denied a second chance for jobs, housing, marriage, and family life.

For one entire month—the entire month of July-- we stand in active solidarity with those who resist the temptation to look the other way and avoid the suffering occurring on the other side of the road and share our abundant resources—which are not ours but on loan to us from God. But these dear men will leave at the end of the month, and where will it leave us spiritually? Each year, I ask myself how we as a faith community can do more? How can we keep the spirit of the Good Samaritan alive in this place long after the sleeping mats are taken away and our men move on down the road?

It's so easy to come down on ourselves for not doing enough but our God is always a God of abundant compassion and mercy. In Jesus' day God was often seen as an easily offended judge who had to be appeased by making a perfect sacrifice. The priest and Levite in the story likely believed the man by the side was dead. Their religion strongly prohibited them from touching a corpse because to have done so would have made them ritually impure, displeasing in God's sight, and possibly punishable by God. Folks, if I believed all that, I too, would have passed by on the other side!

No, I don't believe the priest and Levite were intentionally trying to be uncaring, or horrible people. But they, like us, are often kept from doing what is right by unjust laws, irrational beliefs, and religious and societal practices, stereotypes, and traditions that have long outlived their purposes if they had any good purpose to begin with.

We, too, like the priest and Levite often have pressing duties and responsibilities—demanding jobs, kids, bills, and doctors' appointments that don't easily permit a delay.

We too are hesitant to get dirty with the messy—and possibly contagious and injurious things that comes from helping others with their wounds—be they physical, spiritual or emotional.

We too become overwhelmed by the logistics and time-consuming procedures and red tape required to help hurting people.

We too are afraid of stopping to help for fear of being hurt, robbed, or taken advantage of by someone who could be very dangerous. (By the way this happened to a friend of mine who stopped at the intersection of 405 and 520 to help a family and was conned out of a lot of money).

The road from Jerusalem and Jericho is a long and winding road that is steep and fraught with danger. In Jesus' day it was known as the "Bloody Pass" as it was so easy for robbers to ambush travelers. But as Christians, if we constantly keep playing it safe, we cannot possibly be on the journey that God wants us to be on.

Yes, often we tell ourselves we are doing our best—just like the priest and Levite who were trying to follow the rule book and might have been totally exhausted after going home after a long day of work. But sometimes our best is not enough as the learned lawyer, an expert on religious laws and principles, soon discovered when he asked Jesus, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"

I have to say I love this lawyer! Why do I love him? I love him because he is searching and is not afraid to ask Jesus the hard questions. In other words, he is engaged. If the lawyer's religion was working for him why would he be wasting his time engaging with Jesus? Content people don't usually ask questions—they simply just go with the status quo.

True, today's story says the lawyer is testing Jesus but maybe that is all a bad thing. I would rather someone ask me a challenging question than simply say they

liked my sermon (but, it had put them to sleep!) Yes, the lawyer is an okay kind of guy in my book and apparently, the writer of the gospel of Mark thought so, too. He added a line that isn't in today's version of the story from Luke. Mark has our Lord commending the lawyer by saying to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And so, if today, you find yourself questioning things, wondering why our church and society are struggling to walk in the footsteps of the Good Samaritan, then I believe you are in good company and, like the lawyer, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."

I believe Jesus wants you and me to question, really question, the assumptions, reasons, explanations, and rationalizations that we all make when it comes to not making time to help people—be they family, friends, neighbor or even those who we despise and we are in intense conflict--which was the case in Jesus' day between the Jews and the Samaritans. An amazing dimension to today's gospel lesson is that the despised Samaritan is the one who has stopped to help a Jew.

I would like to turn our attention to a very famous experiment about Good Samaritans. It was conducted at my *alma mater*, Princeton Theological Seminary in conjunction with Princeton University, as an attempt to understand what really gets in the way when it comes to helping people. The answer may not be what you suspect.

The researchers recruited forty-seven seminarians. Some were told to study the story of Good Samaritan and then go deliver a talk about it. Some were told that they were to prepare a talk that had nothing to do with helping someone. As the seminarians were walking between two buildings, they encountered a cleverly disguised actor who was shabbily dressed and making sounds that indicated he needed help. Some of the seminarians were told they had to hurry to the next building in order to give their talk. Others were told they had plenty of time and needn't hurry. So, what did the researchers discover? Who was more likely to stop and help the person in distress? The findings revealed that those seminarians who perceived themselves as not being in a hurry were six times more likely to stop and help the person in distress.

So, the thought I would like to leave you with is this. Even more important than hearing this sermon on the Parable of the Good Samaritan or reading the story yourself, is for you to sit down and chat with God about how you can live a less hurried life. The challenge I have set before you are the same, I have set before myself and our staff. If you truly want to be like the Good Samaritan, and more

like Jesus, stopping filling your weekly calendars to the maximum one hundred percent capacity level. Only schedule at eighty percent and create more space in your life for the unexpected so you, too, will have time to be the Good Samaritan that Jesus wants you to be—the one who crosses over to the other side of the road to help the one most in need. Amen.