

“The Good Samaritan Revisited”

Luke 10:25-37

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As I revisited the Parable of the Good Samaritan this week, I had the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. As I read the parable over and over, I saw clearly the connection between the very beginning of the story where the young lawyer asks about eternal life; and the very ending of the story where Jesus urges this man to relate to his neighbors with mercy. There is a sacred connection between mercy and eternal life.

The young man is really asking Jesus how he can be ALIVE; soulfully alive; how can he experience the abundance of life God intends, how can he know he is fulfilling God's purpose for him. In a way, the lawyer is too young to know exactly what he's asking about. He just hopes there's more to life than what he's experienced thus far. For, thus far, he hasn't loved anybody enough to even sense that life has an eternal quality to it.

Jesus looks at this young man with his X-Ray eyes, with his ability to see into the heart of another human being. And what he sees is a kind of emptiness. The lawyer has been through high school and college and graduate school. He's earned high honors; graduated magna cum laude. He's had internships and field work and special assignments. His mind is full of information. But he is not alive yet. Spiritually speaking, he has yet to be born.

I believe what Jesus sees is that this young fellow knows a lot ABOUT mercy intellectually, but has not yet extended mercy to anyone personally, not yet reached out to anyone with a hand of mercy, not yet experienced the transformation that comes when we take that risk and choose to be merciful. It's as if Jesus is responding to this man by saying:

If you want a taste of eternal life; if you want a taste of the fullness of life as God hopes it will be lived, then get out there and show a little mercy to someone who's down on her luck. Get out there and show a little mercy to someone who's been beaten and robbed and left to die. Get out there and show a little mercy to someone who's life "ain't been no Chrystal stair," to quote the famous poet, Langston Hughes.

At the very end of the parable, Jesus asks the young lawyer which of the three travelers proved to be the good neighbor. And it is the lawyer, himself, who uses the word 'mercy.' "The one who showed him mercy." When Jesus responds with the last four words, we can just about hear his voice; we can just about feel the energy between the two; we can just about taste the flavor of his words, "Go and do likewise." Eternal life is not in the knowing; it's in the doing.

So, I am hopeful about this young lawyer. I think he gets it. I think he goes over to the Salvation Army and volunteers at the shelter, maybe takes a turn ringing the bell outside of Macy's on Christmas Eve. I think he stops along the road and picks up that dead raccoon and buries it in the soft earth. I think he stops pedaling his bicycle and helps the one with the flat tire. I think he understands his mother has dementia and stops shouting at her. I think he offers to mentor a Syrian refugee in English. I think he gets it. What he gets is that it's not all about him. He is not the center of the universe. Knowing this truth is where mercy begins.

In Sunday School, back in the 1950's, our teacher liked drama. She liked to have us act out the Bible stories. She thought that if we acted the stories out, embodied the characters; we'd remember the lesson of the story and maybe incorporate it into our own value system. She'd pass out costumes and props and she'd have us create a skit.

Of course, when it came to the Parable of the Good Samaritan, half of us wanted to be the bad guys who jump out and beat up on a lonely traveler. It was an action-packed role and we thought it was cool. But half of us wanted to be the Samaritan who halted what he was doing in order to help the unfortunate victim.

We wanted to be the hero who didn't ask a lot of questions, who just saw what needed to be done; we wanted to be the good guy who didn't need to ask for a photo ID or a Social Security number or an insurance policy. We just wanted to be the one who offers a cool drink, who uses a cowboy's bandana to make a sling for a broken arm, who lifts that poor guy gently onto a donkey and guides him to the inn. It was a brilliant teaching method because it worked. Whether we were the robbers or the rescuers, we all got the point. There is a time to show mercy. And in some mysterious way, that we were too young to understand fully at the time, showing mercy became how we understood our Christian Faith.

I don't remember now whether that teacher was Ruth Drake or Marian Ruff or Bill Witherspoon or someone else. I suppose it doesn't matter. What does matter is that we learned this essential truth. And when I revisited the Parable of the Good Samaritan this week, and got to the place where Jesus says, "Go and do likewise," I knew he was speaking directly to me. Perhaps, you'll find he is speaking directly to you. If that is the case, then there is reason to believe we are all living in the greatest of hope. Amen.

