

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

8<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Year A

Duane M. Harris

July 30, 2017

Text: Luke 10:25-37

Title: “The Outsiders: The Neighbor”

Since June 18<sup>th</sup> we’ve been listening to the New Testament stories of Jesus interaction with outsiders. We’ve heard about...

...A centurion whose servant was deathly ill but who had more faith Jesus’ tells the crowd than he found among his own people.

...A lonely widow of Nain who lost her only son to death, whom Jesus restores to life.

...A sinful woman who shockingly wipes Jesus feet with tears and perfume out of gratitude and love for him.

...Pastor Reisinger preached a powerful sermon on July 9<sup>th</sup> about a mentally ill man in a place called Gerasene

...Olivia Erwin shared her experience of being an outsider on her mission trip to Colorado that ended with the realization that God is present even in those times we think we are alone.

...Last week we heard about travelers sent by Jesus 2 x 2 into places in which they would be considered the outsider and that we are all sent as baptized persons, even when we might feel like we’re the outsider.

In all of these stories Jesus appears to dissolve the insider/outsider divisions we sometimes draw. With Jesus no one is outside the bounds of God’s mercy and grace. No one is hopeless and even those outside the faith, Jesus proclaims, have faith and sometimes—like the Roman centurion-- more faith than those who are inside. Inside and outside are distinctions Jesus ministry dissolves over and over again.

This morning the Gospel According to Luke is waiting to share yet another insider/outsider encounter that has the potential to challenge the distinctions we sometimes make between insider and outsider.

<sup>25</sup> Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” <sup>26</sup> He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” <sup>27</sup> He answered, “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.”<sup>28</sup> And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”<sup>29</sup> But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”<sup>30</sup> Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead.<sup>31</sup> Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.<sup>32</sup> So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.<sup>33</sup> But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity.<sup>34</sup> He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him.<sup>35</sup> The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’<sup>36</sup> Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?”<sup>37</sup> He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

We’ve heard this story so many times. We’ve seen posters with the kindly Samaritan bending down to the needs of the beaten man. We know how the story will end as soon as we hear the lawyer ask Jesus the question all of us have probably asked: “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?”

The lawyer is not a criminal lawyer. He is part a group who interprets the law in the scripture for the common man or woman, the one who knows his Bible inside and out, the one who did well in the adult membership class, the one who served faithfully on the Church Council, the SPRC, the one who pastored a church. His life has involved a strong commitment to the religious questions of life. And his question is not a threatening one really, not like some Jesus had heard before, those with questions designed to trap him in a conflicting situation. No, this is a question asked by many seeking God.

Jesus answer was simple: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.”

Eternal life, by this definition, is available now. We are living in eternity in the present. It’s not something for which we need to wait. Loving God results in love for one’s neighbor. Loving one’s neighbor results in love for God. Love for one means love for the other. But eternal life is not like a revolving door: you can’t get there on someone else’s push. The relationships between ourselves and God and our neighbors are one we live ourselves. No one else can do that for us.

There's a story of the Prime Minister of Israel challenging the Pope to a friendly game of golf. The Pope, however, was not a golfer, so he called in one of his aides and asked if there was a cardinal who could play on his behalf. The aide said he didn't know of anyone off hand, but that there is a famous American golfer name Jack Nicklaus who is Catholic. "We could make him a cardinal and he could play the Prime Minister on your behalf."

Nicklaus agreed to play for the Pope and was appointed cardinal. When the match was over Nicklaus called the Pope and said, "Your Holiness, I have some good news and some bad news. The good news is that I played the best golf in my life. My drives were long and true, and my putting was splendid."

"What's the bad news?" asked the Pope.

"I lost to Rabbi Woods by three strokes." Nicklaus replied.

In the life of faith, there are no substitutes. Nobody can play the game for us. We can keep company with those who know it better than do we, those who know the course well, who are known as examples of people of deep faith. We can learn from them, but the relationships with God and neighbor are nonetheless ours to cultivate. Jesus' response to the lawyer's question reflects the personal responsibility implied in the law. "Go and do likewise."

But sensing a loop hole, the lawyer asks further, "Who is my neighbor?"

He is met with a story.

One day a man was going to Jericho. This was a road known for its muggings and beatings, the Central Park of Israel. Suddenly, men came quickly from behind the rocks. They threw him to the ground, kicked him till he lost consciousness. He lay there -- half dead.

A priest later came down the same road. He was headed for the Jericho Sheraton Inn, looking forward to his week of vacation from the church. He'd worked hard all week, visited many sick, presided over several worship services, and was looking forward to sitting by the pool with a cold glass of lemonade, laying under the sun with the sent Coppertone filling his nostrils.

He was taking his time, enjoying the walk. Seemed good not to be rushing around trying to get to committee meetings and community affairs.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw him -- beaten. He looked dead. Face white. Blood dried, a dark red line running from his nose, over his cheek to his ear lobe where it had dripped to the ground. His mouth was partly opened, dried mucous on his chin. Naked. No visible signs of breathing. Surely he was dead. The priest passed by him.

Why? Because it was written in the law that a priest who was exposed to the presence of a dead body would be considered unclean. It was against the law. Was it worth going to the other side to find a dead man dead? He had no stethoscope, no oxygen tank, no blood pressure cuff. Didn't know CPR. From where he stood, who is to say whether or not the man was dead?

In the same manner, a Levite came down the same road. He was the associate pastor looking forward to a few days off. He, too, saw the beaten man. But he, too, was constrained by the same law of Moses as was the priest. The man looked dead from where he stood. If he were to approach him, he would be unclean if the man were dead. Unclean would mean he'd be unable to perform his duties. He, too, passed by.

Now a Samaritan made his way down the road. The Samaritans and the Jews had no love for one another. The Jews believed the center for worship of God was Jerusalem. The Samaritans believed Mt. Gerizim was the center.

Neither group was alone in thinking their geography was of central importance. If you took a look at some world maps a few decades ago, some publishers put North America front and center as if the United States was the center of the world. That has since changed but it's not uncommon for people to think of their own geographic region as the most important.

A friend of mine was coming across the US border at Juarez, Mexico, with a missions team. He'd been there as a mission worker with our United Methodist Volunteers in Mission program. The customs officer asked what they had been doing in Mexico. Bruce told him they were doing mission work to which the officer disdainfully replied, "What are you doing that for? Why don't you stay in the U.S. and help the people here?"

The question of who is my neighbor is as fresh now as it was in the first century. For the Jew to think of a Samaritan as neighbor was a shocking thought. In the early part of the first century, Samaritans snuck into the holy places in the Temple in Jerusalem, knocked over lampstands, carved initials in the wall and left a pile of human bones behind. Such a defiling left the Temple unclean according to the law. Jew and Samaritan were at great odds. It's not unlike the Israel/Palestinian relationship today.

The Samaritans, therefore, are the despised ones, the ones who make us nervous or angry. Replace the Samaritan with someone who's homosexual, a politician of the opposite party with whom you might be affiliated, an anti-abortionist -- or a pro-choice activist depending upon how you come down on that issue, and it may reflect more accurately how the listening lawyer might have reacted to Jesus' story. Jesus wasn't using one easily and comfortably loved by the lawyer. So it's not just the guy down the street with whom we have everything in common who is our neighbor. Rather, it is anyone who shows mercy even if the merciful one happens to be someone with whom we may not be comfortable. It just might be the outsider who shows mercy and not the well-regarded insider.

The Samaritan had compassion. Compassion means to suffer with, to remember one's own suffering and respond to another's. Maybe the Samaritan remembered what it was like to suffer. He knew what it was like and decided to help another human being in pain.

Don't we all know what it's like to be wounded? No one need remind us of standing under a tent with the wind blowing, staring at the casket as the pastor prays. No one need remind us of the pain known in those days following.

And who needs to be reminded of the pain experienced in opening a letter or receiving a phone call, email or text, only to receive the news of rejection by another person either for employment or love?

How many times does one need to be reminded of the stinging or teasing known in being physically or mentally challenged, overweight, too tall, too short?

Are there children within, beaten or abused in some way?

Everyone has been wounded in one way or another. And maybe by living from our own memories we can be empowered to reach out to others in their pain by remembering our own, not simply because we are commanded to do so, but out of the love of One who knew rejection,

pain and death and loved in spite of those experiences. Christ taught us and teaches us still that by remembering our own pain we can be set free to love others in their woundedness as Christ has loved us.

But there is more to this story than remembering our own experiences and responding accordingly. There is risk involved here. It is risky to love someone with whom we feel no kinship. It can be a frightening experience to overcome one's inner fears to come to the aid of another.

A Church Council chairperson from one of the churches I served read a story of which I requested a copy the night she shared it with the leaders of the church. Why I did so will be apparent as I share it.

I was walking down a dimly lit street late one evening when I heard muffled screams coming from behind a clump of bushes. Alarmed, I slowed down to listen, and panicked when I realized that what I was hearing were the unmistakable sounds of a struggle: heavy grunting, frantic scuffling, the tearing of fabric. Only yards from where I stood, a woman was being attacked.

Should I get involved? I was frightened for my own safety, and cursed myself for having suddenly decided to take a new route home that night. What if I became another statistic? Shouldn't I just run to the nearest phone and call the police?

Although it seemed like an eternity, the deliberations in my head had taken only seconds, but already the girl's cries were growing weaker. I knew I had to act fast. How could I walk away from this? No, I finally resolved, I could not turn my back on the fate of this unknown woman, even if it meant risking my own life.

I am not a brave man, nor am I athletic. I don't know where I found the moral courage and physical strength -- but once I had finally resolved to help the girl, I became strangely transformed. I ran behind the bushes and pulled the assailant off the woman. Grappling, we fell to the ground, where we wrestled for a few minutes until the attacker jumped up and escaped. Panting hard, I scrambled upright and approached the girl, who was crouched behind a tree, sobbing. In the darkness, I could barely see her outline, but I could certainly sense her trembling shock.

Not wanting to frighten her further, I at first spoke to her from a distance. "It's OK," I said soothingly. "The man ran away. You're safe now."

There was a long pause and then I heard her words, uttered in wonder, in amazement.

"Dad, is that you?"

And then, from behind the tree, stepped my youngest daughter, Katherine.

(Small Miracles: Extraordinary Coincidences from Everyday Life, Yitta Halerstam & Judith Leventhal.)

"Who do you think proved neighbor to the man?" asked Jesus.

“The one who showed mercy”.

“Go and do likewise.”