

Luke 10:25-37

When I've heard this parable, I've gotten all confused about grace. Because if we take this parable the wrong way, it seems as though we need to work to receive grace, or we have to do something for the least of these to receive eternal life. Grace is a free gift from God that we receive through what Jesus has done for us. The saying is, "Grace is getting what we don't deserve, and mercy is not getting what we do deserve." So, I take this to understand that the parable isn't about grace, but about mercy.

Let's think about the man who's lying by the side of the road. Did he get what he deserved? He took this dangerous road from Jerusalem down to Jericho. It was known for the thieves and robbers that hid in the crevasses along the way. Why would this man think that he would be able to travel this stretch of road all by himself? Yet, when we look at who passed him by, we see they all seem to be traveling by themselves, so we can't hold the fact that the man was traveling alone against him. We don't know any more about this man than he was laying naked by the side of the road all beat up and left for nearly dead. Why wouldn't the first person who passed him by immediately stop and help?

There was an experiment done by Princeton psychologists back in the 1970s. There were seminary students who were asked to present a sermon on the parable of the Good Samaritan to a panel who was going to evaluate them. Not realizing they were part of an experiment the presenters were grouped together in a room to prepare. Some of the students were told by the assistant that they were late, they should have been in front of the panel a few minutes ago; the team was waiting for them to get there but it wasn't far, just a 2-3 minute walk. Some of them were told they were expected to present in a few minutes, it was time to leave. The rest were told they had plenty of time before they were to present but they may as well leave now, it wouldn't matter if they arrived early.

On the way there, a man was lying in the alley who looked as though he had been beaten up and needed help. Out of the first group, the ones who were told they were late, 90% of them walked right by the man. The second group, the ones who were told they had just enough time to get there, 45% of them stopped to help the man. And 65% of the third group who had all the time they needed stopped to help the man. Even though they were presenting a sermon on the Good Samaritan only 10% of the group who were in a hurry stopped. Why? Because they had succumbed to what is known as "narrowing of the cognitive map"; they were not present in the moment and could only see the need to get to their destination.

It's like the rabbit from Alice in Wonderland who sang, "I'm Late, I'm Late for a very important date, No time to say hello. Goodbye. I'm late, I'm late, I'm late, and when I wave, I lose the time I save."

The first man, the priest, didn't stop. Was he on the way to an important meeting? We don't know. What we do know is that if he had helped this man who was lying by the side of the road, he would have touched blood and become ritually unclean. It would have taken way too much of his time to go through the ceremonial rituals to become clean again. So he passed the man by. The second man, a Levite, was also in the priestly family. He most likely passed the man by for the same reasons. No time to spare from his priestly duties to help a man live.

Then the third man, who just happens to be a Samaritan, one whom we learned last week despises and is despised by the Jewish people, sees the man lying there and is moved by compassion, by mercy, to stop and help him. Is he in a hurry to get somewhere? We don't know; he must have had somewhere he needed to be because he left the man with the innkeeper with payment for his care and a promise to return in a few days. He has helped a total stranger get to safety, and not only cared for him on the road, but is caring for all his needs until he can return to his side. This man who was lying by the road had no choice as to who helped him, he had to accept the help he was given, or die.

I mentioned my sister last week, and her story fits with this scripture as well... she has no choice but to stay where the accommodations are to her advantage until she can get back on her feet. At our pericope group this week Pastor Karen Lundwall spoke of an experience she had at the grocery store. She had picked up a few extras that she normally wouldn't have, like a beef roast and vegetables to cook with it. As she was placing her groceries on the belt, getting ready to pay a man approached her. He had shaggy hair, wore a baseball cap and was wearing battle fatigues. Like I would, and I think many of us would, she expected him to ask her for money or a handout. Instead, he jumped to the pin pad and inserted his card, paying for her groceries. She was very surprised and protested, telling him he didn't need to do that, that she could pay for her own groceries, telling him he should give his help to someone who needed it more than she did. He just looked at her and smiled over her protests, saying, "Today's your lucky day." And he was off. One of the other pastors in the group said they had seen him do the same thing at a different grocery store with the same reaction from the person whose groceries he paid for. A definition of today's good Samaritan!

It's hard for some of us to receive help when we need it, and even harder to receive help when we don't think we need it. I realized this when I was creating and mailing postcards to invite our neighbors to the Easter services. I should have asked for help! I didn't realize I needed help until the project was about done. I am grateful for the help Lori gave me without me even asking for it. I know that several of you would have stepped in to help if I had only asked, but I realized too late that I needed help. I did get them done and mailed on time, but it would have been so much less stressful and a lot more fun if the project had been shared. I vowed to remember that.

But back to the idea of being in a hurry and only seeing the destination... Let's talk about time. Time is an important thing. It is limited. There is so much to do and so little time in which to do it, that spending time just relaxing seems to be a waste to some people. Yet even God relaxed. On the seventh day of creation God rested and told us to do the same. We were given the command to take time to rest. Actually, if we don't take the time to rest, we lose time. We begin to make mistakes. We begin to stumble. Like the seminary students who thought they were late, we begin to ignore all that surrounds us. Being present in time takes practicing mindfulness, taking time to relax and regenerate and to be with God. It can be done while walking in green spaces or while sitting in your favorite chair. It can be in prayer or Bible reading or just in paying attention *to* and thanking God *for* your breath. Learn to be present to your surroundings, the life you save may be your own.

Now I ask you, who do you see yourself as in the parable of the good Samaritan? Are you the one who is hurt laying on the side of the road, experiencing help you can't refuse? Are you the priest or Levite walking past on the other side of the road? Are you the Samaritan giving the help? Or are you the innkeeper, getting paid to care for someone? And which one of these is Jesus? Which one is God the Father? These are all interesting questions for you to carry with you throughout the week to see if you can come to grips where you stand in relation to the characters in this parable, and what, if anything you need to change to inherit eternal life.

All glory be to God.