

“How the Story Ends”
The Reverend Michael L. Delk
St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
5th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 10C) – 13 & 14 July 2019
Luke 10:25-37

This was definitely NOT how the story was supposed to end. The idea of a Samaritan, of all people, being the hero, would have been incomprehensible to the Jewish crowd gathered around Jesus. Samaritans and Jews despised each other, avoided each other, and had done so for centuries, and to some extent, it’s understandable. They disagreed about very important things. They worshipped God on different mountains. They used different versions of the Bible. But even with these reasons in mind, we can scarcely comprehend the level of vicious enmity between these two tribes, though we shall try.

Imagine putting a Trump supporter and a Bernie Sanders supporter in a small room. Then add an Islamic jihadist, a Christian fundamentalist, and a crusading atheist. Blend into the mix a Kentucky fan, a Louisville fan, and a Duke fan. Shake up a box of scorpions and throw them in there, too, along with several angry rattlesnakes. Stir and let cook for 15 minutes, and you’ll get a rough approximation of how fiercely Jews and Samaritans hated each other.

And that’s precisely why Jesus sprung this little surprise at the end of the parable. He wanted to shock his listeners out of their complacency when it came to the question, “And who is my neighbor?” He wanted to expand their vision radically, so that the concept of neighbor would be defined as broadly as possible, to include those we least trust and most despise, people who are different from us, even people who may have hurt us.

And when Jesus asked which one was a neighbor to the man in need by the roadside, the lawyer who asked the question couldn’t even bear to say the word “Samaritan,” but answered instead, “The one who showed him mercy,” and that’s good enough. A true neighbor shows

mercy, which means taking risks and crossing lines and tearing down the walls that divide. A true neighbor puts away prejudice, self-righteousness, pretensions of privilege, and the resentment built up by endless feuds, accusations, and ugly comments. A true neighbor forgives – that is the essence of mercy – and sets it all aside to help heal and make whole the poor soul lying by the roadside in a pool of his own blood.

A neighbor somehow manages to see with eyes of compassion, and motivated by God's love takes the time and does what's necessary to care for the stranger, who in fact is not a stranger but a neighbor. Both the priest and the Levite saw the man, and perhaps felt badly for him, but did nothing. Maybe they thought he was too far gone, but they didn't pause to check his pulse. Maybe they thought that this was just the new normal. "Such a pity what the world's become. Things like this happen all the time now, and what can a single individual do to make a difference?" Who knows what was going through their minds, but what they did was abandon one of their own.

The Samaritan, however, when he saw this beaten man, stopped, no longer worried with what was written in his day planner. He gave that half-dead man first-aid, threw him over his donkey, took him to an inn, and doled out two days' pay for the man to be cared for, with a promise of more if needed, a promise that could have easily been exploited by the innkeeper. That's mercy.

Of course, it didn't have to happen that way. The Samaritan, tired of the abuse and insults hurled upon his people, could have stopped and stood over the wounded man, and said, "Looks like you finally got what you deserve. Die slow so you can suffer more." But he didn't say or do those things, and we don't know why. Perhaps the man by the road got lucky and met the most tolerant Samaritan alive, but it's more likely that God inspired the Samaritan – in that

crucial moment – to let go of his fear and rage and spite, and to simply be human and faithful and kind.

Who are your neighbors, and what does it mean to be an authentic neighbor to them? Is it about geographical proximity, the little village we call home, or the people we share an online echo chamber with, the people who think just like us and won't challenge our assumptions and conclusions? Is being a neighbor about party and policy and church and clan? Or could there be something more, something we'd rather not see, much less do anything about?

Who's being beaten up in our world today, at the precipice of life and death? Who desperately needs help but keeps getting ignored, including by fine Christian folk like us? Who are the vulnerable exploited, the people from whom things are taken, left by the roadside of life with pain as their sole companion?

If we worked together for an hour, we could make a list so thick that you couldn't shoot a bullet through it, but here lately my heart's been touched by the "tired . . . poor . . . huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse . . . the homeless, tempest-tossed," words inscribed on the Statue of Liberty. With what's been happening lately, I've begun to wonder if we ought to take that plaque down, just for sake of integrity.

I've also been thinking a lot about those lost souls who wander in a spiritual wilderness, or a spiritual fantasy world, people who think they have no use for community, and its mutual support and discipline. In fact, numerous people in various conditions have surfaced in my mind just in the past week. So the one easy thing about being a neighbor is that none of us need to look far to find someone that we can be neighborly toward.

But being a neighbor goes both ways. It's a reciprocal relationship. We need to allow people to be neighborly toward us, too, and that can be harder than scraping a guy up off of the

roadside. It takes humility to admit that we need help, and it takes vulnerability to accept help, especially when that help comes from someone we don't know, or from someone we know but don't like, or even from someone we both like and know.

Nobody wants to be an imposition, and nobody wants to be seen as weak. But those who think they never have and never will need help are the ones who need help the most, because a person who denies the reality that everyone needs help from time to time is pretending to be God, and that's not a good place to be. We also need to give people the opportunity to be good neighbors. As we all know, it's a liberating, joyous experience, a way for faith to grow and express itself. It's how people experience their faith more fully. Far from being a burden, accepting the help of someone striving to be a neighbor is a blessing for that person.

And all of this neighborliness is driven by the Samaritan. Not the one in the story, but the one who told the story, Jesus. Now he was Jewish by ethnicity, culture, and religion, but there were those who despised him as much or more than they did Samaritans. They viewed him as a betrayer of their race and faith, because he said and did things that were offensive and unorthodox.

Making a Samaritan the hero of a parable was one of the least obnoxious things Jesus did. He shook people up who had settled down quite comfortably. He made claims about himself that bordered on the blasphemous, and for some, crossed the line. Jesus released a pulse of energy into a calcified system that did not want to be disturbed by these new vibrations of the Spirit.

Jesus, the Supreme Samaritan – the one rejected by so many, including many of those who say they follow him – Jesus seeks the hurt, the lost, the abandoned, and when he finds us by the roadside or in the nighttime of our fears, he lifts us up and takes us to a place where we can

be healed and made whole again. He's already paid the price for our recuperation on the cross, guaranteeing that no matter how high the tab, he will pick it up.

When Jesus reaches out to us, sometimes our pride tempts us to push his hand away, to lie in the delusion that "I'm fine. I can manage on my own." But by grace, the light of wisdom can puncture our pride and cause it to collapse into humility, and we can let go, because that's how the story is supposed to end, each of us lifted up in the loving arms of Jesus, set free from cruelty and death for a life worth living now, and a life everlasting to come. Amen.