

Deuteronomy 30:9-14

Psalm 25:1-9

Colossians 1:1-14

Luke 10:25-37

It's been a disturbing, emotional-roller-coaster of a week. It began with all of us celebrating the Fourth of July, a joyous and celebratory occasion. As the week unfolded, we were faced with the brutal killing of two black men: Alton Sterling a 37 year old in Baton Rouge, Louisiana who lost his life when police killed him; followed shortly by the death of 32 year old Philando Castile, who was shot and killed by police during a routine traffic violation stop in a suburb of Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota. The following day, police shot and killed 19 year old Dylan Noble, a white man, while he was parked at a service station in Fresno, California. We woke up to the news that five police officers had been killed by a sniper and many others wounded at a peace rally in Dallas, Texas protesting the killings that had happened in the previous few days. The difference between these killings and the almost 100 other killings that happen on a daily basis in this country is that these were all video-taped with a cell phone. We can see it and we can hear it. We cannot deny it or casually dismiss it as though it had never happened. As a nation we are traumatized and reeling from the events of this week. This is not an invasion of a foreign army.....this is Americans killing Americans.....and it has been happening for quite some time, but our eyes have now been opened. To quote the comic strip character Pogo in a rather gruesome way, "We have met the enemy.....and he is us!"

As these events were unfolding during the week in one horrifying piece of news after another, I was struggling with what to write about the Good Samaritan.....perhaps the most famous parable Jesus ever taught. It eventually occurred to me that God's timing is always perfect and that this parable not only speaks to us today.....it shouts at us!

Parables by their very nature are supposed to be a bit prickly. They are supposed to reveal a truth to us that is transforming.....that changes us.....that changes how we see the world and how we see ourselves in it. They are designed to make us squirm just a bit as we wrestle with our own internal thoughts and feelings. This particular parable is not an 'example' parable, although it seems like it on the surface. It is not simply, as many of us have believed for much of our lives, a matter of Jesus giving us an example to follow and telling us to be kind and take care of others in distress. There is a message in this parable that goes so much deeper than that. Compassion is good and, hopefully, all of us are moved to help someone in distress; but the real command from Jesus goes even farther.....and it is a bit unsettling.

PAUSE

The story this morning begins with the Jewish lawyer asking Jesus how he could get eternal life. Jesus does what he does often. He answers the question with another question. What does the law.....the Scripture.....say about that? This lawyer is well-educated and he is no fool, so he quickly rattles off the verse in Deuteronomy 6:5 "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" and the verse in Leviticus 19:18 ["You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge

against any of your people, but] you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.” Jesus agrees with him and the lawyer gets an A+ for his answer. DO these things, Jesus says, and you will live.

But that’s not enough for the lawyer. He wants some clarification. So, he says, “Who is my neighbor?” He must be thinking.....is my neighbor somebody in the neighborhood? Or somebody in my own tribe? Or somebody in the general vicinity? Or someone who’s part of my friendship circle? I mean there must be some boundaries here. Who exactly are you talking about, Jesus? Who is my neighbor?

And Jesus answers him with the famous story that we all know so well.

On the dangerous road between Jerusalem and Jericho, a man was attacked by bandits who stripped him naked, stole all that he had, beat him and left him for dead in a ditch by the side of the road. A priest walked by and crossed to the other side of the road to avoid the man. A Levite came by and did the same thing. And then a Samaritan came by and stopped to help the man. He poured oil and wine on his wounds and bound them, put him on his own beast of burden and took him to an inn to recuperate. He gave the innkeeper money and asked him to take care of the wounded man and promised to come back and pay the innkeeper any money that he had spent on this man as he recovered.

PAUSE

We need to remember when we hear this story that Jesus was a Jew and the audience who is hearing this story is Jewish and the audience to whom Luke is writing is predominately Jewish. That’s crucial to understanding the deeper meaning of this parable. The Jews and the Samaritans have been locked in a bitter feud for hundreds of years.....each believing that the other is completely wrong in their relationship to God. They each believe that the way they are interpreting scripture and worshiping God is the one and only correct way.....the only way acceptable to God. They are mortal enemies. In short, they hate each other.....passionately. We know.....right here in the Episcopal Church..... what that kind of passionate disagreement can be like for all involved. It’s painful and hurtful and we can’t imagine Jesus siding with the folks who are on the other side of this issue from us.

But guess what? That’s exactly what Jesus does.

PAUSE

Now we all know that the Samaritan who helped the man is the Christ figure in this story. Jesus comes to a wounded and broken world and binds up our wounds. He takes us to a safe place to recuperate. He spends all that he has.....his life..... to be sure that we will recover and be OK. So for Jesus to cast a Samaritan in the role of the savior.....the Christ-like figure.....is supremely offensive to the Jewish audience standing there listening to him. And for us, in 21st century America, the lesson for us lies in the fact that Jesus is siding with the same folks that we believe are dead wrong!!!

It’s probably no accident that we don’t know anything about the wounded man. We don’t know his social class. We don’t know his ethnic background. We don’t know his religious affiliation or his belief system. Perhaps he’s also a Samaritan, but how would anyone know that? Any of us could be the man in the ditch.....as well as any who are persecuted and also any who do the persecuting. As we hear this story, we generally assume that he’s Jewish, but maybe not. We do know that he is in dangerous territory just as we are in America at this moment. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho is notorious for thieves and murderers lurking behind large rocks by the side of the road. And each of us in America have

been put on notice that we could be the target of a random shooting at any time or in any place. Everyone knows that the road between Jerusalem and Jericho is a bad neighborhood and a place where no one should be walking alone. But every single one of the characters in this story is walking alone.....the wounded man, the priest, the Levite and the Samaritan.

As it turns out, the one most hated by those who hear this story is the only one who sticks his neck out to help. He is the one who crosses to the other side of the road to help the man in distress. He's the one who is Christ-like. And Jesus tells us to do likewise.....do what he did. Go to the one in distress.....even if it is your enemy!! So what does that do to our assumptions about all the people we know.....and don't know.....that we hold at bay because of our own feelings of dislike, or our own prejudices, or our own fears of people not like us? What are we going to have to give up to be the Good Samaritan?

PAUSE

FEAR!!! That's what we're going to have to give up. FEAR would seem to be the crux of the problem.....then and now. All the turmoil that we are witnessing in our country right now can be traced back to FEAR.....FEAR of the Other.....and fear is a great motivator. Fear that someone not like us will harm us or take something away from us or prevent us from living our lives the way we want to. FEAR!! But Jesus tells his followers repeatedly.....not once or twice.....but over and over and over again: "DO NOT BE AFRAID." And he says to them, "Fear not, for I am with you." Maybe the question for us is: Do we really believe that?

One of my own fears is in speaking out.....particularly in a venue where people will verbally assault me viciously when I say something they do not like. I have discovered, however, that silence is complicity. To remain silent when something is happening that shouldn't be happening is to allow it.....to comply with it.....at the worst, to endorse it. If we say nothing, we are in fact 'agreeing' although we may not be agreeing at all in our hearts. It is scary to speak up. It is scary to put ourselves out there and verbally protest what is happening. It is scary to cross to the other side of the road. Historically, people have been killed for doing just that. Better to keep our mouths shut, we think. Or we fall back on the belief that 'this is really none of my business and I don't want to get involved.' Or 'this isn't happening anywhere close to me, so why should I put myself at risk?' The fear is real.....and palpable. And yet, Jesus, says to us, "Do not be afraid." Cross to the other side of the road.

Last weekend while we were celebrating the Fourth of July, the world lost one of the great moral voices of a generation, Eli Weisel, the Holocaust survivor who enlightened so many of us with his experiences in a Nazi concentration camp and his relationship with God. He reminded us that: *"There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest."*

PAUSE

So, Jesus tells us to cross the road. Go over to the other side and help the one who is in distress.....even if that person is our mortal enemy or simply someone whose lifestyle or religion is one that we disagree with or don't understand. Elsewhere, Jesus tells us to love our enemies. To do good to those who seek to harm us. So what do we need to do to cross the road? What can we do to heal this broken man lying in the ditch.....and what can we do to heal this broken world?

Patricia Pearce has written a beautiful essay on three ways that each of us can be a peacemaker in a time of hate. Her essay gave me courage and hope.....when I am afraid to speak up.....because these three things are all things that I know I can do. Any of us can do them.

She says first of all, stand in solidarity with any group of people that is under attack.....Muslims, women, black people, Asian people, Latino people, the LGBT community, immigrants, Jews, Catholics, the handicapped.....any oppressed group. The example she shared was the response of a community in which someone threw a brick into the window of a Jewish family displaying a menorah. Within a few days, every house on that street had a menorah in their front window. The expression of hate ended. Another example was a community in which some very nasty graffiti was written on the outside of a house that was displaying a rainbow flag. Within a few days, every house in the community was flying a rainbow flag. The expression of hate subsided. And we've all witnessed the clever ways that people have surrounded mourners at a military funeral to shield them from being harassed by a group shouting hate-filled comments and sporting placards with ugly and hurtful messages.

Solidarity is social disapproval for anti-social behavior. Persecutors tend to want to isolate the victim, the target of their hate. Solidarity tends to isolate the persecutor, not the victim. It sends a strong message that the hateful behavior will not be tolerated. Ms. Pearce warns that the time for the solidarity must begin when the persecution starts, not when the Gestapo are at the front door. Don't let persecution get a strong foothold. No group should ever be the target of hate. When one group is targeted, we are all targeted. If it can happen to someone else, it can happen to us. These examples of ways to respond to targeting are expressions of love in the face of hate. And love and solidarity eventually always win. The voices of love just have to make more noise and last longer than the voices of hate.

But, Ms. Pearce says, if we want to actually transform the root of the problem, we need to love the person who is hate-filled, also, the persecutor. That's a tall order. I find that so hard to do. Jesus tells us to love our enemies.....love the ones who intend to do us harm. Cross to the other side of the road because even though they may not appear so, these folks are wounded and in distress. Anyone who is intent on targeting another has lost sight of the fact that they themselves are made in the image of God. They cannot see that they have intrinsic value that has nothing to do with being 'better than' someone else. They are seemingly out of touch with what makes them so afraid. They are unaware that all of us are made in the image of God and as such, there actually is no "Other" to hate or to fear.

And lastly she says, heal our own minds. All of us live inside our own heads and we can decide what thoughts we are going to feed and nourish and which ones we are going to starve to death. We actually control the configuration in our own heads. We can furnish that space any way we want; we just need to realize that we can actually choose what thoughts we are going to live with. If you don't like the furniture occupying your own mind, throw it out and redecorate. I redecorate on a regular basis! We can actually have arguments with ourselves about what we are going to allow on the radar screen and what we will not allow.....and what we will give voice to and what we will not. The more we are at peace within ourselves, the less likely we are to see anyone as the "Other" and much more likely to realize that it is OK for us to be different and that we are all in this together.....all made in the image of God.

In the image of God is Alton Sterling.

In the image of God is Philando Castile.

In the image of God is Dylan Noble.

In the image of God are the 5 Dallas police officers whose names we don't yet know.

In the image of God are the souls we lose each day in America as a result of the violence of one American against another whose names are known only to God.

In this moment of national crisis, may God bless America and may God provide each one of us with the grace and courage to set aside our own fears, to go across the road and be for those in distress the Good Samaritan. Practicing Christianity is not easy. We are walking on a dangerous road, but we are not walking alone.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.