Who is the Traveller?

July 10, 2022, Pentecost 6

Amos 7: 7-17 Russell Mitchell-Walker

Luke 10: 25-37

The story of the Good Samaritan is one of the most familiar parables in the gospels. We know from the story that a good Samaritan is someone who helps someone in need. Many of us may know, that in the time, Samaritans were despised and hated by the Jewish community. There was deep seated racism against the Samaritans in the system and culture. Samaritans were hated “nonbelievers” from the other side of the tracks. They would have even been assumed to be the ones who would be the robbers in the story. The enmity of Jews and Samaritans dated from the 8th century BCE. The Assyrian King Shalmaneser and his invading army had taken the leading citizens of Israel into exile in 721 BCE never to return. Subsequently the remaining people of the Northern Kingdom had intermarried with immigrants forced to replace the exiles. The Samaritans rejected this view as a vile Jewish lies. They identified Eli, the priest of the sanctuary of Shiloh who mentored Samuel, as the culprit who had established a sanctuary at Shiloh to rival the one established by Moses on Mount Gerazim. So even in history the stories for the discrimination differ. In the parable, for the one to stop and help the traveller to be a Samaritan, would have been shocking, even offensive to the listeners as Jesus told the story.

I invite us to reflect this morning on the traveller, the one who was attacked and left on the side of the road half dead, from a few different perspectives. We know nothing about the traveller. So, let’s first assume he is Jewish. How might he respond when he wakes up in the inn, and is told the story of one who stopped, came near to him, was moved with compassion, bandaged his wounds, poured oil and wine on them to soothe and clean them, put him on his animal, brought to the inn, and gave the innkeeper money to care for him? He may feel overwhelmed with gratitude and appreciation for all the stranger did for him. Now, how might he respond when he learns that it was a Samaritan who did all these things? Would his feelings change? Might he feel uncomfortable? Might his feelings about Samaritans change? Maybe there is opportunity for transformation, which is part of what loving your neighbour is all about.

The Samaritan didn’t promise to come back right away and keep fixing everything for the traveller. In paying the innkeeper to care for the traveller, and offering to pay more on his return, he made it possible for the traveller to have some kind of community, and supporting the basic support networks of that community to get him back on his feet again. He offered a support of ‘ministry with’.

Now, another perspective. This one is borrowed from Michael Blair, our United Church General Secretary, which he shared when he was at an Affirm United Conference a number of years ago as a resource person. (Affirm United is the LGBTQ support and advocacy group in the United Church). Michael raised the question within this story, what if the traveller was a Samaritan? The Levite and the Priest are often given the excuse that they did not stop to help the traveller because they did not want to defile themselves or make themselves unclean and be unable to perform their temple duties by touching a bloody or dead person. However, if the traveller was a Samaritan, it is very unlikely they would have gone near them as well. If you look up the road from Jerusalem to Jericho it is a narrow treacherous trail, that descends over 3000 feet in 24 km. Much of the road is so narrow that you would have to almost step over someone who was left on the side of the road, beaten. So, they would have gotten close enough to see whether they were alive or dead, and would probably be able to tell if they were a Samaritan. And if so, they would have avoided him all the more. To think of this, puts a different spin on the story and the assumptions made about it.

Finally, what if the traveller was you. What if you fell, were mugged, hurt and in pain by the side of the road? Would you care who it was who stopped to help you? Wouldn’t you want the first person to come along to stop and help you? If the first few people didn’t stop, would you care if the next person was someone you despised, disagreed with politically, or even hated or considered an enemy? In that moment all you need is help and support. All you need is someone to be your neighbour.

Regardless of who the traveller is, the primary message of Jesus, is go and do likewise. Being a neighbour means stopping to help those in distress, regardless of who they are, to see them, have compassion, go to them and support them. This is what it means to love our neighbour. To do mercy and show loving kindness. Even to our enemies. Especially to our enemies. We pray that there me be more love of neighbours in our world, that may lead to a meaningful and just peace. May we do all we can to love our neighbours each and every day.