

Amos 7:7-17

Psalm 82

Colossians 1:1-14

Luke 10:25-37

Sometimes our attention is focused in one place when we really need to be looking in another so we just don't see what we need to see. Or perhaps someone with a different point of view tries to explain that viewpoint to us, but we just don't see it that way.

In our gospel lesson this morning, Jesus is trying to bring into focus for us something that he suspects we just don't see. A lawyer has asked him what he should do to inherit eternal life. It's a question Jesus gets a lot. When Jesus asks him what's in the law, the lawyer answers correctly, "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." He's got it right. But as lawyers are prone to do, he has a follow-up question. He's been justified about knowing the law. Now he wants to be justified in knowing who his neighbor is, so he asks Jesus to clarify: "Who is my neighbor?" He's expecting a checklist of some kind, but Jesus answers him with a parable.

Jesus is very specific in describing the setting for this story. He doesn't just mention 'a road' that a man is walking down, he says, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho." Anyone who has ever seen the terrain in this area knows that it is as desolate as a moonscape. There are no trees or vegetation of any kind. There is no sign of civilization or even animal life. It is completely barren, but it is littered with large boulders and cliffs that contain caves often used by bandits for cover. It's a very dangerous road even to this day. It's not the sort of road that is at all safe and certainly not one that anyone should travel alone...but all the characters in this story do. They each travel alone despite the danger.

The man going down this road is jumped by robbers, stripped, beaten and left for dead. He must have been a terrible sight. A priest comes by...sees him...and crosses over to the other side of the road in order to avoid him. A Levite comes along and does likewise. These are revered and holy men in the Judean community that lies between Jerusalem and Jericho. Jesus offers no explanation for why they moved to the other side of the road and continued walking. They saw enough to know they didn't want to get involved. The sight of a beaten and bleeding man who looks like he might be dead is pretty gruesome and distressing. He's scary. And obviously there are some bad guys around...the beaten man is proof of that. Maybe they were afraid for their own safety. Maybe each of them had obligations in Jericho and people waiting

for them there. Maybe they were on their way to conduct a religious service. Perhaps they were concerned about becoming defiled and unclean if the man were already dead and they came near him or touched him. This is Judea. The man in the ditch is most likely a Jew. He is most definitely a neighbor. If either of them had truly wanted to come to this man's aid, they wouldn't have cared if they broke some religious laws in order to help him and they wouldn't have cared if it was dangerous and they wouldn't have cared if they had kept people in Jericho waiting or let them down. They didn't see an opportunity to fulfill the commandment from God to love their neighbor as themselves. For whatever reason, they just didn't see it that way...and they walked on.

Then came a Samaritan. Oh, dear! He's in hostile territory. What is *he* doing walking alone on this desolate road in Jewish territory? Who knows? But he's there. Introducing the Samaritan as the hero in this story is more scandalous to those hearing this story for the first time than we might imagine. We know that the Jews and the Samaritans were feuding like the Hatfields and the McCoys, but it doesn't hit us emotionally the way it did the original audience of this story. Intellectually, we know these groups are enemies. We may even know *why* they are enemies. Basically, the Jews believe the Samaritans are heretics and the Samaritans have no use for anyone who excludes them from their own religion. And they weren't looking at it intellectually. That Jesus would make a Samaritan the good guy in this story was gut-wrenchingly emotional for that original audience of Jews. Their collective blood pressure must have taken an immediate spike!!

For our purposes, let's insert our own nemesis into this story. Is there some group of people that we would rather die than take help from? Is there some group of people that would rather let *us* die than help us?

The world we're living in now is so polarized, it may not be hard for us to identify...for ourselves...what group of people represent the 'other' to us. We regularly hear public statements painting entire groups of people with a stereotypically wide brush. It's rhetoric that stirs up our anger and makes us fearful. Can we think of one group of people that we feel is so different from us or so antagonistic to us that we might be fearful of them or consider them enemies? Maybe it's as simple as looking at a political party that is opposed to our political views. Maybe it's people who believe in nationalism or people who don't. Maybe it's international and what came to our mind is a sect of Islamic extremists. Whether we want to or not, we all have a group that we respond to as if they were 'the other' and not like us. We are fearful of them and either timid or overly aggressive around them or both. Or we simply avoid them when and if we can. In a word, they simply aren't like us. We don't understand them and we don't trust them and we don't like them.

Now close your eyes and imagine that you are injured and lying in a ditch by the side of the road. Perhaps you are unconscious. You're naked and you're bleeding in multiple places. Now insert your nemesis...your 'other'...into this story. How do you feel about your enemy or your nemesis coming to your aid and caring for you as if you were a treasured member of the family?

*Pause*

It's a jolt! It's an emotional jolt!! And this is Jesus' point. If someone is a human being, they are God's child and a member of the family...whether we see it that way or not. Maybe that's why Jesus told us to love our enemies. Maybe that's what Jesus wants us to see in this parable. Maybe that's why Jesus made the scandalous choice of selecting the Samaritan to be the hero...the good guy...to a Jew in distress. This is not a simple morality play telling us we should be nice to people in need. This is a commandment to love our enemies as well as our friends. This is the revelation that *everyone* is our neighbor...not just the person who lives next door or the one who is like us, but also the one we mistrust or despise. That's our neighbor!

The ones this man thought he could trust...the ones who were like him...the ones he revered in his religious community...let him down. The one he hated and feared was the one who showed him compassion...the one who risked his own safety...the one who went out of his way and literally went the extra mile...the one the beaten man in the ditch was sure was looking at God in the wrong way, was the one who actually did as God had commanded him to do. An experience like that is transformational. After an experience like that, we would never be the same again. We would never see things in the same way again. Jesus just looked at the lawyer and told him to "Go and do likewise."

So what is it that Jesus wants us to see that perhaps we don't see? That everybody is our neighbor. All human beings are part of the family.

And God loves us all....the ones who get it right and the ones who don't; the ones who live the way we think people should live and the ones who don't; the ones we understand and the ones we don't; the ones who believe what we believe and the ones who don't; the ones who are like us and the ones who aren't; the ones we love and the ones we don't; God loves *all* his children. No exceptions! And God commands us to do likewise.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.