

5th Sunday after Pentecost July 10 2022

Luke 10:25-37

Have you ever deliberately not seen something?

You know what I mean. That piece of trash on the ground, the person hurrying towards the closing elevator doors, someone who you just know is going to ask you a question you really don't want to answer. So, you pretend that you don't see them and go right on by or let the door close. We've all done it, for reasons good, bad, and indifferent. Too tired, too focused, too busy. Just can't right now.

I had that in mind as I read the parable of the merciful Samaritan this week. And it made me wonder if the difference between the Samaritan, the priest, and the Levite lies in the seeing.

Now, this is a rich biblical text through which God has spoken and can speak all kinds of wisdom to us. Far beyond anything I could cover in our time today, so I would encourage you to sit with it further and see how the Holy Spirit moves your understanding.

The question of the lawyer is, "I will inherit eternal life if I do/fulfill/acquire... what?" Jesus goes all Socratic method on him and asks what Scripture says and how the lawyer understands that passage. He then affirms the lawyer's answer to his question. If you do/fulfill/acquire love of God with everything that you are and love of neighbor as yourself then you will live. To the question of who is neighbor- again the lawyer provides his own answer- the one who did/fulfilled/acquired mercy on the man half dead. Go and do likewise, Jesus says.

The parable is familiar to many of us but let me point out some details.

The one lying stripped, beaten, and half-dead by the side of the road is referred to simply as “a human being”. An anthropos. There is no way for any of those who walk by or even those who are listening to Jesus to figure out anything more about him. Is he a Jew or Gentile? Is he rich or poor? Is he a jerk or a saint? A man of importance or another joe schmo? We cannot categorize him at all other than human being, in need of help, or he will die.

We also know nothing about the Samaritan other than he is part of a group of people that the Jews of Jesus’ day would have considered to be blasphemers, a despised people, those who would have been the bad guy in any story just by being named Samaritan. We don’t know anything about him other than he helped the man in need. Which, as a colleague liked to point out to us, was all that really mattered to the man in need.

But back to the seeing. Did you notice in the reading that each of the three who went by, the priest, the Levite (both part of the religious institution of the day) and the Samaritan see the man half-dead. The first two pass by on the other side. I imagine it is that reaction like many of us were thinking about at the beginning of the sermon- when you just didn’t want to see.

But there is something different in the seeing of the Samaritan. When he sees the man he is “moved with pity.” The word used here is *splagchnizomai* (say it with me!). It’s one of those fun Greek words. It’s almost onomatopoeic- it sounds like what it is. It literally means a movement of the inward parts. His guts moved. It hit him in the feels. Luke uses this verb on two other occasions in his Gospel. It describes Jesus’ response when he sees a mother processing to bury her son

(7:13) and it is the prodigal father's response when he sees his lost son returning home (15:20).

There is something different in the seeing, the vision, of the Samaritan that evokes or allows him to be moved with pity. But what is it? The Greek word used for "seeing" is the same in all three cases, so that can't be it. What is it? What is different about how the Samaritan sees? I wonder if at least in part it isn't about being vulnerable. About being willing to be vulnerable and take a risk.

On a practical level it could have been a trap- to leave a half-dead man or someone meant to look that way out there for other travelers to find and then for bandits to spring out and rob the one coming to give help. Reaching out always has risks.

It is also vulnerability because it means infringement on his life. Luke assumes that the feeling of pity will lead to some kind of response. And that costs. It costs time, money, resources, attention. It places an obligation on the Samaritan, "I'll come back to check on him and pay you whatever more you spend on his care."

I confess to you that sometimes this has been why I have chosen not to see someone in need. Because I was afraid of what the cost to me in time, money, resources, or attention might be. Because there have been times when I have responded, when I did, literally, stop for someone by the side of the road and it cost.

It is vulnerability because it places us in relationship with this person. Who we know nothing about other than they are in need. And what if they're a jerk? Or belong to another political party? Or (gasp) they're a Cyclone fan!

Seeing in this way, feeling pity, showing mercy, requires being vulnerable. Along with all these a recognition, that this could be me. That life could go wrong in the blink of an eye and a gunman could rain death upon us, or a cancer diagnosis could come, or an accident.

Seeing that leads to pity and action means being vulnerable, but also means looking without distinction. Seeing without definitions intended to bound our care. Jesus knows that in the understanding of neighbor the lawyer would have been taught he would only have been obliged to love other Jews. Those were his neighbors. Those in his tribe. Everyone else, Gentile, Roman, barbarian lay outside their circle of concern. You owe them nothing.

In setting up his parable, by calling the one lying half-dead, the one in need nothing but a human being. Which all of us are. Jesus removes this cue and forces the lawyer to think not about whether a response is owed because someone is in our tribe, but whether it is owed because they are also an anthropos. A human being created in the image of God.

And the lawyer got it right. While he couldn't give credit to the Samaritan for being this way he does acknowledge- the neighbor was the one who saw the man in need, was moved with pity, and acted to save him from death.

Great, Jesus says. Go and do/fulfill/acquire that. And you will live. A life fuller and more abundant than if you bound your concern. If you see categories of people who are worth your care and those who can just suffer and die.

What Jesus is talking about is an extension of Paul's definition of the Kingdom of God from last week. Anyone remember what the first fruit of having received the Holy Spirit is?

Love. The self-giving love that is what God shows us and which we are to show to both God and our neighbor. And who is our neighbor? Any human being in need. Without distinction. Regardless of their economic status, their voting record, their education level, country of origin, whether we like how they dress, or what pronouns they use, or their beliefs on guns or abortion. We love all of them. Without distinction.

Why? Because while I would guess we all tend to read the story and imagine ourselves as being the Samaritan or at least that the point is to act like the Samaritan, the good news for us lies in remembering that we are the human being lying half-dead on the side of the road and God in Jesus Christ is the one who has had pity on us, stopped, and resurrected us. Who sees us, in all our ugliness, our pain, our confusion, and has shown us mercy.

For the reality is when you are half-dead, can you resurrect yourself? In fact, can you do anything to save yourself? Even wave for help? No. We are dependent on the mercy of others. God in Jesus has done just that. Has seen us. Seen our wounds, that we lie at death's door. Has stopped and bathed us in the waters of baptism and anointed us with oil to heal our wounds. He has brought us into the inn that is the church, the Body of Christ, so that we might continue our healing and who continues to check in with us and make sure that we are recovering. Continues to cover the bill.

The good news is that God in Jesus loves us with wild abandon, will always see our need, stop, and raise us to new life. Not because we belong to any group, but because we are a human being, one created in God's image, who is in need.

Columnist and student of human behavior David Brooks has been studying why we seem to have a steady stream of young men willing to commit mass murder. Among other things they often feel invisible, unseen. As one researcher put it, they are not necessarily loners, they are failed joiners. Brooks points out that just over half of Americans say no one knows them well. We are a people lying beside the road and everyone just seems to go by on the other side.

God sees you. God loves you- even if you don't love yourself. God loves the messy, imperfect, not fit for Tic-Tok you. God knows you, finds value in you. And when we are at our best, our most vulnerable to admit that we are like that too, the church is a place where you can come and be seen, and be loved, and be healed through the power of the Holy Spirit at work in this assembly. Because we have been seen by God in Jesus Christ. And he stopped and healed us too.

Maybe this is the vulnerability of the Samaritan that lets him see and show mercy. Because he knows what it is like to have people go by on the other side, but also because he knows what it means to have someone see, stop, and help.

Let us dare to be that vulnerable. To remember how we have been raised by God's love. Let us see as Jesus sees, human beings in need of help. Let us go into This world showing mercy to all who are half-dead and see the wonders of what God's love can do.