

Luke 10: 24-37

July 10, 2016

Chad Martin

Introduction

What a week. What a week. While on vacation last week I had only sporadic access to the internet—which was a welcome respite. But it meant that on Friday morning, as we emerged from the Maine woods and began making our way home I was still taking in the news that two more apparently innocent black men had been shot by police when the news broke that five police officers had been killed in Dallas.

After casually mulling over the story of the Good Samaritan for more than a week, upon hearing this news I thought, “My God. Where was a Good Samaritan for Alton Sterling and Philando Castile. Where were the Good Samaritans in Dallas?”

There were no disruptive acts of mercy for any of them.

Disruptive acts of mercy. This is a phrase I picked up from Jonathan Sauder a couple years ago. That’s how he described the heart of Jesus’ life, teaching, death and resurrection. Not just mercy that helps us feel good about ourselves. Acts of mercy that disrupt the social order and disrupt our sensibilities and our comfort zones.

If you like sermon titles, you can call this one “Disruptive Mercy.”

This gets at the heart of the story Jesus told in conversation with the lawyer who wanted to know about eternal life.

Regardless of how familiar this story may be, there are two significant pieces of background that are important for us to recognize as we read the story today.

First, it is important to remember the animosity between Samaritans and Jews during the time of Jesus. And, second, it is important to understand the dangerous setting of the story Jesus told.

Samaritans and Jews

There was deep animosity between Samaritans and Jews in the time of Jesus. The gospels repeatedly highlight encounters between Jesus, a Jew, and Samaritans that show him reaching across social barriers with compassion.

But headlines like, “Good Samaritan Helps Driver Who Flipped Her Off Moments Earlier,” or “Good Samaritan Drags Driver From Burning Car” reinforce the notion that “Good Samaritan” means simply helping a stranger in need. At best it means heroically rescuing a stranger from physical danger. But such headlines rarely recognize the socio-political implications of the story Jesus told. Let’s make sure we don’t make the same mistake. A short bible review will help us.

As the Old Testament recounts, the people of Israel were grouped in twelve tribes. For a time all twelve tribes were ruled by one king—Saul, then David, then Solomon. But after that, the tribes divided into two kingdoms—Israel in the north, and Judah in the south. Then, as the Old Testament also tells, both kingdoms were occupied by foreign empires. First Israel, then Judah. In both cases the foreign occupiers exiled the ruling classes. In the case of Israel, pagan foreigners moved in when much of the Hebrew population was displaced. Eventually those in exile were freed to return to their homelands. In the case of Judah, the Jewish exiles refused to assimilate with any foreigners who had moved in, maintaining their form of pure Jewish faith and practices. But in the case of Israel, whose capital was in Samaria, the exiles intermingled with those who had taken up residence there, forming a new form of Judaism influenced by other religious practices. They became known as Samaritans, and the southern Jews in the land of Judah cut off ties and refused to let them worship in the temple in Jerusalem. The Samaritans made their own temple, and the two peoples grew to despise and distrust each other.

Added up the history of divided and bickering kingdoms, the importing of new religious practices and the assimilation of foreigners among the Samaritans meant that Jews viewed Samaritans as political, religious and cultural “Others.”

The lawyer that had approached Jesus was a devout Jew focused on keeping the law as his people understood it. And Jesus framed a story with a Samaritan hero—told in such a way that the lawyer himself had to admit that

the Samaritan was the neighbor, the one he was called to love. That is disruptive mercy.

The Road from Jerusalem to Jericho

As I said, we should also remember the dangerous setting of Jesus' story. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was notoriously dangerous. The story is inherently violent. The man was beaten so badly he nearly died. But this would have been the least surprising part of the story. This road, which is still a long, desolate journey, even with modern roadways, was a harrowing journey in ancient times. The road descends steeply through miles of desert, cutting through cliffs and rocks on either side. It's a setting right out of a Hollywood western-style ambush. The experience of the man who was robbed and left for dead would have been common in New Testament times.

One can sympathize with the priest and the Levite who kept moving when they saw the beaten man. They likely feared for their own safety.

It is doubly surprising then that the Samaritan took his time with tending to the injured man, stopping at an inn and offering to return if necessary. Who knows what business a Samaritan had to deal with in Jerusalem, the heart of enemy territory. He may have already been harassed or profiled in there. Of all three who passed by the man on the road out of Jerusalem, the Samaritan likely had the most reason to fear for his own safety. Stopping to help was a risky move. His choice to respond out of pity with compassion was a choice to risk his own safety—a risk exaggerated by the time he took to offer thorough care. We don't know anything about the innkeeper, but even stopping there may have been a risk for the Samaritan.

So the story Jesus tells is politically, culturally, religiously—and perhaps racially—charged. The story he tells is also set amid violence and palpable lack of personal safety.

Think about that a moment given our current situation.

The story Jesus tells is politically, culturally and racially charged. The story he tells is also set amid violence and palpable lack of personal safety.

This is the situation in which Jesus calls his listeners to practice disruptive mercy.

What About Us?

Now I invite you to take a moment to reflect on this story in a more personal mode. Who among the host of characters do you identify with today? I know there are those among us dealing with ravaging physical illnesses, mental anguish and chronic pain; perhaps you identify with the injured man in need of mercy. Others may identify with the priest or the Levite. Or the Samaritan. Or the lawyer seeking to do what is right. Or Jesus with a visionary narrative to reframe people's sensibilities. Without judgment, listen for where you are in the story....

What can you learn from that character about yourself?

Whatever insight you glean, carry it with you today. Your insights may or may not harmonize with what I find in the text, but trust that your insights have something to teach you.

As Frank said to me before the service, this is a time when there may be things going on inside us that we cannot yet describe in words. So it may be a time when we are best served by silence. Yet I believe that a vital part of why we gather here is to remember our corporate, sacred calling together. So I have more to say.

I cannot read this story apart from the wave of devastating news of acts of violence that washed over me just a couple days ago. I believe this is a momentous week for our country and for our communities. I believe we are being invited and called to be disrupted by the events of this week.

For those of us who identify as white, we are being called especially to practice acts of disruptive mercy. I have been trying to listen to the voices of people of color who are friends and colleagues as I figure out what it means to practice disruptive mercy right now. Listen to what a Facebook friend of mine, a man of Puerto Rican descent who is an art professor at a prestigious liberal arts college:

“With the exception of driving to school everyday, my wife always drives. After years of being pulled over and getting searched and asked demeaning questions I fear driving.”

An African-American friend and colleague in ministry wrote:

“Jesus prayed in the garden and then went up on a cross I'm gonna need some of you to move past prayer and take up a cross... And I'm gonna need some of you all to stop sleeping while we praying and sweating blood because we know our death might be imminent.”

Another African-American colleague simply wrote: “I'm tired of feeling – ‘sick and tired’.”

Those of us who identify as white have a special calling and burden to respond. Steve Kriss, a mentor and colleague who works for Franconia Mennonite Conference, put it this way:

“For those of us who are people of faith, especially those of us who would be called white and Christian, it is fully past the time to speak, embody and act if we honestly believe that the hereafter is anything other than a hustle.”

The message is clear. For those of us who are white, this is not the time to stay above the fray on some hilltop of safety. Jesus said we will recognize who our neighbor is when we risk something of ourselves to act with mercy and compassion, even in the middle of dangerous places.

Jesus shattered the notion of the Other, saying the categories we put on each other have nothing to do with what it means to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

What matters is when we see bodies lying half-dead by the side of the road—and I cannot help but think of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile—will we be moved to act with compassion?

My friends it is fully past the time to speak, embody and act if we believe our faith means anything. We must be about the work of dismantling white supremacy, the work of doing anti-racism in our communities,

in this congregation

and in ourselves.

What this looks like in practice is probably different for each one of us. If you're not sure, start by listening to people of color in your circles of friends, at work and at school. Start by sharing ideas with your small group or others here at CMCL.

For those of us who identify as people of color, I make no assumptions about how you feel this morning. I pray this congregation can be a place of mercy. But I also know we have often acted like the priest or Levite, scurrying past opportunities to work at antiracism while distracted by tasks that seem more urgent to us. That can no longer be our response.

Conclusion

Finally, we might learn from the early church fathers and mothers who read the story of the Good Samaritan allegorically. They saw the Samaritan as a representation of Christ-Sophia, and the wounded man as a picture of humanity. Read this way, it becomes a story of broken, half-dead humanity in dire need of divine mercy. Yet that mercy comes in a surprising form; it is the one perceived as the Other who saves us.

A deep truth of the story is that no matter our angle on the story, divine mercy often comes to us in surprising ways when we least expect it. We are likely to be surprised at the ways Christ-Sophia, the spirit of divine love and compassion, comes to those who suffer.

Jesus said the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. It starts so small we hardly notice it, yet grows large and vibrant. Jesus said eternal life will be found where one person is moved to act with disruptive mercy.

I found a seed of good news in the introspective and honest reporting and commentary last Friday. The juxtaposition of innocent black men being shot by police and of police being shot seem to jar commentators into a deeper level of vulnerability and honesty about racism.

Even Newt Gingrich, on a video with African-American activist Van Jones, said:

“It took me a long time, and a number of people talking to me through the years to get a sense of this. If you are a normal white American, the truth is you don’t understand being black in America and you instinctively underestimate the level of discrimination and the level of additional risk.”[1]

That is a seed of good news!

There is a seed of good news in the crowd of people who showed up for Friday evening’s Black Lives Matter vigil here in Lancaster.

There is a seed of good news in the biography of Dallas' police chief who is uniquely positioned to help bring positive change from the tragic shootings there. His own son once shot and killed police officers and the pain of that experience informs his innovative work in Dallas.[2]

There is a seed of good news in the call the mayor of Pittsburgh made on Friday to convene a peace summit this week. He is already planning meetings of law enforcement, faith leaders, community activists and others "to work constructively to address violence facing Pittsburgh and the entire nation, and find ways to promote racial healing." [3]

Hopefully you have noticed other seeds of hope in recent days too. So that we can pray together...

Loving God, in whom is heaven, holy be your name. Your kingdom come.

Your kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven.

On earth as it is in heaven.

Amen.

[1] Tim Haines, "Newt Gingrich and Van Jones Discuss Unity, How To Learn From Tragedy in Dallas," on *Real Clear Politics* (July 8, 2016).

Online at:

http://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2016/07/08/watch_live_newt_gingrich_and_van_jones_discuss_events_in_dallas.html. Accessed July 9, 2016.

[2] Holly Yan and Joe Sterling, "Dallas police chief's storied career marked by tragedies," on *CNN* (July 10, 2016). Online at:

<http://www.cnn.com/2016/07/09/us/dallas-police-chief-david-brown-profile/>. Accessed July 11, 2016.

[3] See Mayor Peduto's press release online at:

<http://pittsburghpa.gov/mayor/release?id=6265>. Accessed July 9, 2016.