

“A View from the Ditch”

15th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 10: 25-37

The Rev. Emily Krause Corzine
Associate Minister

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From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 • Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: home@first-church.org

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

Prayer for Illumination: Merciful God, Startle us by your presence with us this morning; Silence in us any voice but your own. Challenge us by Your Word read and proclaimed and continue to lead us by your Holy Spirit. Amen.

“Rabbi, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Like a good rabbi, Jesus responds to the question with a question, “What is written in the law?” The Lawyer knows his Hebrew Scriptures. He replies with a summation of the law, “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.” (Lev. 19)

Jesus answers, “You are right, do this and you will live!”

It’s about life and death!

In an attempt to make himself right with God, the lawyer asks Jesus a follow up question, “And who is my neighbor?”

Jesus responds with a parable.

A man traveling from one city to another, down the seventeen mile descent from Jerusalem to Jericho. On the way he was mugged, stripped and left bleeding; laid out in the ditch on the side of the road, scripture says he was half dead.

The traveler on the dangerous road was laid out, knocked flat and in desperate need of help. His attack was truly awful. Yet it **wasn't altogether unexpected because that road was a notorious** hideout for bandits. The truly unexpected came next. Two people who should have helped him pass by on the other side. The priest and then the Levite consciously avoid him. Role models from the religious community walk on by, actually step to the other side of the road and pass on by. We hope the man in the ditch was not conscious enough to notice this devastating side step.

But even that is minor in comparison with what happens next. Up until this point all the characters in our scripture reading have been from the same cultural and religious heritage – all Jews. Jesus, the lawyer and the rest of the people listening to the parable, as well as the characters in the parable itself; the priest, the Levite, the injured man, even the robbers; they most likely were all Jewish.

In standard story telling format the next person to walk down that road should have been a Jewish layperson. That would have provided a good and humorous moral to the story – how a nonreligious professional could outshine the priest or the Levite and save the day.

Instead, trouble arrives. A Samaritan traveled near. It was no secret that Jews and Samaritans had issues. Their history was bitter and their animosity deep. Samaritans were considered half breeds and heretics. Samaritans were monotheistic but they rejected the Temple in Jerusalem. Their insurmountable differences led Jews and Samaritans to avoid one another. There were bitter tensions. The Samaritan is the last person expected to come to the aid of a Jew on the road from Jerusalem. Samaritans and Jews were enemies, pure and simple.

The world looks different when you have been knocked flat, when life has laid you out. We may be laid out physically on a gurney, pushed down a corridor toward an operating room. We may be laid out emotionally because of the recent death of someone we loved. We may be laid out by an assault – robbery or bullying. We may be laid out by the end of a relationship; by something we did or wish we had not done. We may be laid out by watching the events of this week stream on the web and run on a continuous loop. The world looks different when life after life is snuffed out too soon, taken because of fear of difference, fear of other. The world looks different when life has laid us out. We are vulnerable and the kindness of a stranger, any stranger can make the difference between feeling alive or dead.

Clearly, I remember learning the story of the Good Samaritan this way. The Samaritan was full of compassion and helps out and we should do the same. We should be more compassionate. But that interpretation of the parable is built on seeing ourselves as the Samaritan. We so want to be the Samaritan, the one who has resources and choices and makes good decisions. The first hearers of this parable would never, ever see themselves as the one who helped, the one who **showed compassion. Jesus sets up this parable so we can't see ourselves as the one who is compassionate.** Which means that we are the one in the ditch, with no control over what happens to us. **That doesn't sit well. I don't like that. I would rather be the priest or the Levite who at least get to decide who they stop for.**

Jesus sets it up so we are the helpless one, forced to accept help from our enemies. Challenged to see our enemy as something more than our enemy.

The Samaritan offers care to the man in the ditch, bandaged his wounds, picked him up, took him to the nearest Inn and took care of him. Paid the innkeeper to continue his care until **his return. The Good Samaritan extends God's mercy.**

Amy-Jill Levine, a Jewish New Testament scholar at Vanderbilt University, has done thoughtful work reclaiming the Jewish context of the Gospels.¹

According to Levine, the book of Leviticus is clear that love has to extend beyond the people in one's group. Leviticus 19 insists on loving the stranger as well. So to ask "Who is my neighbor?" is a polite way of asking, "Who is not my neighbor?" or "Who does not deserve my love?" or "Whose lack of food or shelter can I ignore?" or "Whom I can hate?"²

So who is my enemy? The Good Samaritan if I am a Jew, The Good Hutu, if I'm a Tutsi; A Good Settler, if I am a Palestinian; The Good Ex-husband; the Good Racist, the Good Nazi, the Good ISIS fighter. It's uncomfortable to think that if I was in the ditch and looked up and saw my enemy---- would I take help?

Who would that enemy be?
It's about life and death.

¹ [1] Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*. For an introduction to her work, go to <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2014/09/21/four-teachings-from-jesus-that-everybody-gets-wrong/>

² Levine, *Short Stories*, p.93.

In 2016, many of our black sisters and brothers in this country travel on that road to Jericho. An uncertain, dangerous path from one destination to the next. The Streets of Baton Rouge, Falcon Heights, Dallas, could be WestBroad Street or Cleveland Avenue.

The prophet cries: How long, LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, "Violence!" but you do not save? (Habakkuk 2:1)

The violence and the hatred in our culture must stop. Events of this week and escalating tensions in our communities filter to every newsfeed and social media presence. Real time events capture it for us all. A nation stunned, its leaders, its best political minds, its best theologians, its best mothers and fathers and grandmothers and grandfathers, sisters, brothers, children---are speaking up and speaking out to begin a new road for justice and peace.

There has to be a better way for all of us to move forward **together. It's not easy. I don't make the assertion** here today that I know how best to do that alone. We must acknowledge the narrative of racial inequality that exists in our country and we must work hard and long to help write a different story. We write that new narrative together. First hearing the cries of

those who haven't been heard and who haven't had an equal place at the table. (Jesus said something about welcoming everyone to the table.) Part of that story is systemic racism going back hundreds of years. We must together address that. Part of the epidemic of gun violence which has a serious snowball effect in education, health, incarceration, family stability and social capital. Those costs weigh largely on the shoulders of black Americans. Gun violence is part of a vicious cycle of race and inequality in the U.S., reflecting existing social inequalities, and also making it even more challenging for young black people, especially young black men, to escape poverty and violence.³

It's about life and death.

How long, O Lord?

Where we see hate and prejudice and fear. We must sow love. To comfort those who hurt and who cry out for justice. To march for Black Lives Matter. We must come to grips with our own hate and bigotry and homophobia that are rooted deeply within us and seek out a better way forward. But we can only do that if we are vulnerable enough to face that in

³ Richard V. Reeves, The Brookings Institute, December 15, 2015. <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/social-mobility-memos/posts/2015/12/15-guns-race-different-worlds-reeves>

ourselves. Only then, can we move forward and generate a new narrative for this country and all of its people.

We return to the Scriptures in times of distress and tragedy, **searching for a glimmer of light to shine in the darkness.** “I will lift my eyes to the hills, from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. (Psalm 121). I wonder if the man in the ditch, a ditch that we too might find ourselves in sometime, looked up in search of help. When two passed by and finally, his enemy stopped to offer **mercy... there was help from the Lord. The Lord was already** in that ditch, comforting, consoling, protecting the one battered and bruised.

In our country this week, there is outrage. There is hurt. There is deep pain and there is fear. As people of faith we come to seek comfort, encouragement, a Holy presence to remind us of the unfailing promises of God. We grieve the loss of so many. We grieve the terror and pain inflicted on so many young lives. We look to the Lord. And there is nowhere that we can go that is too far from the ever present reach of our God who loves us and comforts us.

There are families in Baton Rouge, Louisiana forever changed with the death of Alton Sterling. The lives of police officers Blane Salamoni and Howie Lake—forever changed. Lives

forever altered by the loss of a young man. The families of the police officers---forever changed.

There are families in Falcon Heights, Minnesota, forever changed by the death of Philando Castile in the front seat of a car. A girlfriend-unable to assist him to reach a hand out to him because of her need to remain safe. A four year old ---- witnessing it all, scared; forever changed, comforting her mother in the back of a police cruiser. This four year old in the back of a police car, comforts her mother in this time of distress and heart ache. The life of the Police Officers Jeronimo Yanez and Joseph Kauser involved and their families--forever changed.

And Dallas. The unfolding chaos of a Thursday night after a peaceful protest, changed a community. Changed a nation. There is profound grief and anger of the loss of police officers in Dallas but in the large network of law enforcement across this country. Five officers lives lost. Brent Thompson. Patrick Zamarripa. Michael Krol. Michael Smith. Loren Ahrens. Their families grieve. The entire community of Dallas. A nation on edge. The family of assailant Micah Johnson-stunned and grieving as well. The injured still healing. The thousands traumatized.

How long, LORD? How long?

How does a community heal? How does a nation begin to heal? What can we do, with such fear and anger and longing that can bind us together, rather than further tear apart the fabric of our common life? We must study, we must worship together, we must dialogue together, we must walk together in the long, hard days months and years **together**.

The Gospel of Christ calls us to live together seeking justice. It calls us to love all people and to figure out what that means in being and action. It calls us to work for peace. At the heart of the gospel story is a Samaritan, willing to cross lines of race and background to help someone he was told to avoid and fear. He is our model for a life in these times that are rocked by threat, fear, hatred and chaos.

A blog post came Friday. It is a prayer of lament which helps name a reality of grief when our words fail. I'll share some of them here.

“As people of faith, we are failing one another and we are failing God: our maker, our Mercy, our Justice, our Peace. We pray for each life lost, each family bereaved, each neighbor whose fabric has been

violently torn asunder by bullets and hatred and fear. We pray for ourselves, that this hurt and outrage, this yearning for justice will not fade from our minds before our hearts are broken open by your passion for mercy and justice and love.

Restore our hope, our heart, our sense of the possibility of holiness and wholeness in your creation. Tend the fires of our rage so that they burn for justice and warm the hearts that have grown cold. Make the waters of our tears nourish the river that flows through the city of God, and the tree of life that is for **the healing of the nations.**”⁴

Jesus says Love Thy Neighbor. Who is not my neighbor? Who does not deserve my love? Whose lack of food or shelter can I ignore? Whom can I hate?

Jesus says no one!⁵ Amen.

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⁴ Facebook, Blog. Rev. Dr. Laurie Kraus, Disaster Assistance Coordinator of the Presbyterian Church (USA).

⁵ Thanks to colleagues for assistance with this sermon development.