

Walking Home
Daniel 7:1-7; Luke 10:25-37
October 19, 2014
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I. Introduction

“Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” So begins one of the most beloved stories in our scriptures. We have been spending some time over the course of this fall looking at stories, and how stories shape us and how our stories shape the people around us. And while I tend to like to focus our scriptures on stories that are less familiar to you all, this is just such a perfect one to explore the stories of how we engage and help one another as we celebrate this morning our ministries with the homeless and engage in the Tyler Rusch Walk.

So, as Janet Craswell said in our Children’s time this morning, try to imagine never having heard this story before and listen for sort of the narrative arc of it. It starts off, of course, with a lawyer asking Jesus this question, and not to overstate the obvious, but this is not a civil attorney. When Luke talks about lawyers, he’s talking about an expert in the Jewish law. Luke uses the term “lawyer” and “scribe” fairly interchangeably throughout his gospel, so this is someone who’s an expert in the law of the Hebrew people, and he asks Jesus a question that clearly he knows the answer to. And Jesus, in classic Jesus response, says to him, “You’re the expert in the law. What does the law say?” And the lawyer gives him the standard answer of, “To love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and spirit and to love your neighbor as yourself.” And Jesus says, “You know the answer to that. Do this and you will live.”

II. Story within a story

By way of a sidebar, note that this lawyer is asked about eternal life, which has connotations for life after death, Jesus ties that very directly to how we live now, and the implication there is that the kind of eternal life with God that is offered to us after death is available to us right now. We don’t wait for it. We claim it here. So, Jesus says, “Go and do.” In other words, put what you know into action. And then the lawyer, both because he’s embarrassed and also because he’s an intellectual and that’s his comfort zone says, “Well, tell me exactly who my neighbor is.” In other words, “Let’s talk philosophy a little bit. Who are the people that I should be caring about? How does the law unfold? Let’s have an intellectual dialogue.”

And Jesus says, “Well, let me tell you a story. There’s a man going from Jerusalem to Jericho and he is mugged and robbed and beaten almost to death,” and right from the beginning of the story, notice what Jesus does. Jesus invites the lawyer and us instead of being in the role of the helper, to be in the role of the person being helped. He asks us to start identifying with the one who has been wounded. One of the Biblical scholars I read called this “taking up the vantage point of the ditch,” what does

it look like when you're in the ditch and need help. And he wants the lawyer to start from that perspective before he moves to his normal perspective.

So, if you place yourself in the ditch and this horrible, traumatic event has just happened to you, the thing that many people in an urban area fear the most, except this not only is being robbed and beaten but you're also in a terribly desolate place. So your very life is in danger and you're lying there and you don't know what to do or how you're going to be saved. All of a sudden you see up the road coming down the road the senior pastor of the national church and you think to yourself, "I'm going to get taken care of. I mean, here, of all the people I might know, here is somebody who has got a sacred obligation to care for me." Except of course he doesn't. He walks on by. Look at the emotional arc there: you're in the very pit, the very bottom of despair and you see salvation on the horizon, and then it's gone. So, then, of course, he looks up and he sees the chair of the church council or the chair of the serving committee of the national church coming down the road, "Well, maybe the pastor was having a bad day but here at least is somebody else who is obligated and has shown a passion for lending a hand," except of course they don't.

Now there is a lot of commentary about why the priest and the Levite don't stop to help this broken, wounded man. Are they trying to remain ritually pure? Are they fearful of the robber still being in the area? All kinds of sort of hypotheses about why these holy people don't do what they're clearly called to do. And you know what, Jesus doesn't seem to care a bit. Jesus doesn't engage in any of that at all, because frankly it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter whatever the excuse was for not engaging a person in need. There is no excuse. They had a call that they failed to meet. And then, we see an illegal alien, an immigrant, coming down the road who's got plenty of reason not to engage us, plenty of reason to try to avoid the police, plenty of their own struggles that they're wrestling with, and it's that person who stops and offers some care.

Jesus' question to the lawyer then is, "If you're in the ditch, who is your neighbor? And the answer is anybody who I meet and who can offer me help." And so Jesus then turns it around and says, "Go and do likewise."

It's so easy to become detached from the people around us who are in need. After the first service this morning, one of our parishioners was telling me about a study that she had read recently in which family members were dressed up as homeless people and put in the way of other family members who failed to recognize them most of the time because we just don't look. We don't engage. We remain detached. We love talking about homeless policy issues, right? We love talking about economic recovery, we love talking about education policy. And that's good unless it keeps us from seeing the person who is right in front of us and who needs to be engaged by us.

III. Empathy

I've been doing a lot of reflecting this week on empathy. You heard Jesus' words there that the Samaritan looked and had pity on him. What does it mean to have pity and how do we develop that? How do we develop the gift of empathy, which is an ability to see the world through somebody else's eyes? Interestingly, that's exactly what Jesus invites the lawyer to do. What does it look like to see the world instead of from the point of view of a well-to-do religious scholar to be beaten and robbed and in a ditch? Jesus is inviting the lawyer to learn some empathy.

The person who coined the term, "social entrepreneur" is a man by the name of Bill Drayton who explores social entrepreneurship around the world. He does a great deal of research and writing on it, and he discovered that the single most important factor in developing powerful transformational leaders is the ability to help develop empathy. Empathy allows us to hear other people's stories in different ways. It allows us to engage people in different ways to help solve the problems that they're facing. It helps us build teams and communities that solve those problems. And he has developed schools across the world whose primary goal or whose first job is to teach empathy, because he has a very strong conviction that empathy is learned and developed as it is practiced and that part of raising strong leaders is to teach our children empathy. You all know that every year we name our walk for the homeless after a young man by the name of Tyler Rusch. Tyler died 11 years ago, so many of you probably didn't know him, although I know that many of you did. I never had a chance to meet him, he had died a couple of years before I came on board here, but I have heard stories about him over the years from many of you who taught him in Sunday School or when he was singing in choir. By all accounts Tyler was a very special youth in terms of his level of emotional intelligence and his level of empathy, he had a gift for engaging people where they were and hearing their stories. And his parents gave him a chance to develop that gift in a variety of ways, taking him to Africa to see refugees, for example. But in particular, bringing him to our shelter here in our church and giving him the chance to engage in hands-on work with people who needed to be engaged. And Tyler had a gift for that.

Tyler was an athlete, so he could engage the guys in the shelter around sports and develop a connection with them there. He loved children and so when our shelter swapped off midyear and started working with the mothers with children who would stay here for half the year, he engaged the children with great enthusiasm and joy. He had a gift for connecting and helping people feel valued. And while there's a sense in which that was clearly an innate gift of his, it was a gift that was fostered and nurtured by his parents giving him those opportunities. And what Bill Drayton wants to suggest is that all of us can have empathy, we can learn it, we can teach ourselves, we can give ourselves opportunities to allow that gift to develop so that we can avoid being the priest and the Levite and start to become more like the Samaritan. It's a learned gift. And we are so blessed in our church here to have the chance to learn that, just like Tyler did.

I heard a story this week I hadn't heard before -- which is new to his family, too -- which is that Tyler used to bring his pillow to sleep at the shelter at night and one day

the woman who's his housekeeper saw him take his pillow out to the shelter for the evening up here and then come back without the pillow, and she said, "Well, where's your pillow, Tyler?" And he said, "Well, I must've forgotten it up at the church. I'll go get it later." But then the next time he went to the shelter, he brought another pillow and accidentally left it here for somebody who needed it. When we have the chance to really engage the people around us, particularly the people who are vulnerable and in need, we get changed. We start to learn what it means to look through another person's eyes, and that's how the world starts to change.

C.S. Lewis said, "Do not waste time bothering about whether you love your neighbor. Just act as if you did. As soon as we do this, we find one of the great secrets of our faith. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love them. If you injure someone you dislike, you will find yourself disliking him even more. But if you do him a good turn, you will find yourself disliking him less." Our actions shape how we see the world, and we are so blessed to have the opportunity right here to do meaningful, meaty, hands-on work that changes the world at the same time that it changes us.

In this sermon that the Prophet Jeremiah gave on the steps of the temple in Jerusalem, on the steps of his national church, was to say that just because we come to a big, beautiful, glorious edifice at which to worship, just because we have the opportunity to listen to glorious music as we praise God does not make us faithful to what God has called us to do and who God has called us to be. That our faithfulness to God, our reflecting who God is and God's essence is not seen in our worship, it's not seen in the building, it's seen in how each of us work to build a kingdom of justice. It's seen in how each of us cares for the most vulnerable people in our midst.

IV. Conclusion

So, I want to invite you all, I want to urge, I want to beg you today to make a commitment, each of you, to do some hands-on work in our ministries this year at some point. Many of you, of course, log countless hours in some completely amazing work for which I am deeply, deeply grateful. But it's a smallish core of our members, and each one of you, each one of us, brings a gift to this work that nobody else has. God is calling you to use that gift, to start to learn to see the world through another person's eyes and in that way start to discern how to change the world in which we live. So, I want each of you to claim that this morning. Just try it one time. Just come do one thing. Go on one food run, bring meals to the shelter one night and stay and chat with the residents. One time. And I can say that because I have some level of confidence that you're going to figure out very, very quickly that that's transformative work and you're going to keep doing it because that's where we start to meet God. So, commit yourself to that today and go out and walk in our homeless walk today, help us raise some money to keep those vital ministries going, and start to teach yourself what empathy is about.

"Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Amen.