

## *Compassion*

The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost  
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July 11, 2004  
Trinity Lutheran Church

Deuteronomy 30 9-14; Psalm 25:1-9  
Colossians 1:1-14; Luke 10:25-37

Grace to you all and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

There was a certain church out in the western part of the country. The congregation's pastor had retired and almost two years had passed as they searched for a new one. Happily, a new pastor had recently been called. The Call Committee had enthusiastically told everyone how wonderful his preaching was and how much good he was sure to do as he helped to build the congregation. Everyone was excited, and finally, the time came when the new pastor was to arrive and the whole congregation was abuzz.

On Saturday the sanctuary was cleaned perfectly and everything was shined, polished, and in its place. So many flowers adorned the place that one would have thought it was Easter. Even the paint on the doorjambs was touched up.

Sunday morning finally came and people began to flock to the church to get a load of the "new guy." However, the first folks to arrive were confronted with a shocking sight. There, sitting right on the walkway that leads up to the main doors was ... a homeless person. In the old days, this person would have been called a "bum." He looked like a person who had fallen on the worst of times back in the Great Depression. He had a grimy, greasy wide-brimmed hat pulled down over his face. What one could see of the man's face was unshaven and dirty. He was wrapped in an impossibly tattered overcoat. And oh his shoes ... sticking out onto the sidewalk ... his feet wore a horrible set of boots. The sole of one of the boots was flapping loosely from the bottom of the shoe. His bare, dirty foot could be seen sticking out for all to see. The man just sat there partially blocking the main walkway, and he remained motionless.

The first people who came on the scene didn't know what to do. They were afraid to go to the man and touch him. To do so might startle him and provoke him to dangerous actions. The man may simply be sleeping, they thought, and when he wakes up he might simply go on his way. Discretion being the better part of valor, they left the man alone and hurried inside to ensure everything was ready for worship.

Other folks came along later but the man was still there. A few folks thought that it might be a good idea to call the police or maybe an ambulance service to remove the man. Others weren't so sure that sirens and the hubbub of emergency vehicles were the kind of attention wanted by the church, especially on such an important day. These folks, too, left the man alone. So did everyone else, each for his or her own reason.

Everybody found their way to their favorite pew. Everything looked, smelled, and sounded wonderful. The bell choir was offering their well-rehearsed prelude and everyone was anxiously awaiting the first appearance of their new pastor from behind the altar.

And then it happened. The bum came ... in the door. He seemed to be aimlessly wandering down the center aisle, not sure of where to go. And he kept coming. Further and further down the aisle he walked. He was almost up to the bell choir! Many of the musicians were so unsettled by the sight that they lost their place in the musical score. But the strange man passed through the midst of them and continued up the steps to the raised chancel area.

Finally the man stopped and seemed to gather himself. He respectfully removed his hat, bowed, and slowly turned to face the horrified people. He spoke in a confident, clear manner. The man in those offensive clothes introduced himself as their new pastor ... and he announced that his sermon that day would be entitled “compassion.”

Our gospel lesson this morning is very well known. Most of us know this story by the title, “The Good Samaritan.” However, Jesus doesn’t describe this man as “good.” Jesus does say that the man was filled with “compassion” or “mercy.” I like to call this lesson, “The Compassionate Samaritan.”

When we hear Jesus’ parables, we often try to figure out which characters might be the ones we should imitate. It’s natural to try to determine who the “bad guy” is and who the good guy is.” First, the priest (the pastor of his time) passed by on his way away from the Temple. Surely this man was not on his way to worship, he was going in the wrong direction. But he didn’t stop. He’s a bad guy. Next, the Levite came on the scene. Levite’s were lay leaders at the Temple – sort of like a church council member might be here at Trinity. He didn’t stop either. Here was another bad guy. The third person in Jesus’ parable – folks always show up in three’s don’t they? – the third person should logically have been an Israelite, a simple member of the congregation. But no, Jesus throws us a curve ball. A person never welcome in the Temple congregation came along instead.

When we hear of the things the Samaritan did for a stranger in need, it’s natural to think that Jesus wants us to be like him. But what do we know about Samaritans? Would you want to be “one of them?”

It turns out that Samaritans were not foreigners to Israel in the sense that people from other nations were. Samaritans had no nation of their own. They weren’t welcome in anywhere. You see, when the people of Israel were taken into exile, some of the Jews produced children with the local folk. Their half-breed children came to be known as “Samaritans.” They were “unclean” because of their mixed heritage and not welcomed in “proper” society. More than that, they were hated, often beaten, and usually chased away from social gatherings. When this compassionate Samaritan man brought his half-dead companion into the inn, he was taking a terrible risk. Perhaps the innkeeper would chase him away. Maybe an immediate assumption would be made that it had been the Samaritan who had beaten the unknown man. If so, the authorities might be called and the Samaritan might face imprisonment or even capital punishment. Still, he cared for the beaten man, and he promised to pay for the care of that man

in the future. Here is the “good guy.” In our mind’s eye, he wears a white hat just like Roy Rodgers’.

We instinctively know that Jesus intends us to be like him. This Samaritan was the model for how to be a neighbor to someone truly in need. He wasn’t compassionate because he was expecting to be paid; instead, he was the one who did the paying. There is no indication that he did what he did to assure his life in the hereafter. He did what he did because it was the right thing to do. In our hearts, we know a lot about the compassionate Samaritan.

But who was the man in the ditch? What do we know about him? Jesus tells us almost nothing. We know that robbers grabbed him, they stripped him naked, they took everything he had, and then they beat him half to death. He was left there to die. Was this a rich man or a poor man that the robbers attacked? Was he a Jew, a foreigner, or was he another Samaritan? Why did the robbers pick *this* man to attack? Jesus says nothing about these things. Who do you think the injured man was?

The lawyer who had confronted Jesus wanted to know who his “neighbor” was. He was searching for legal limits to his responsibility. Surely he wasn’t supposed to help just anybody, was he? By telling the story in the way he did, Jesus put the legal expert in the place of the man in the ditch by asking in effect, “If that were you in the ditch, who would you say your neighbor is?” The stunned legal expert who had been hoping to trap Jesus could only croak out, “The one who showed him compassion.” The lawyer’s obvious prejudice prevented him from saying the words, “the *Samaritan* was the neighbor.”

Any of us, with all of our faults, could be the person in the ditch. Robbers still exist and can do great damage, but there are other things that can attack us and leave us like the half-dead man. Illness might strike and put us half-naked into a hospital bed. Personal problems like divorce can happen to anyone and leave us feeling battered and helpless. Business cutbacks can leave us without jobs, penniless, and at the mercy of those who might take advantage. Yes, any of us could be that person in the ditch.

Let’s take another approach to look at who the person in the ditch might be in the parable. What if the person stripped naked and beaten half to death was Jesus himself? Does this sound familiar? Wasn’t this Jesus’ own condition as he was taken to the cross to free us from our sins? How would Jesus, after being stripped naked, beaten, and on His way to crucifixion, identify a neighbor?

When one of us, one of the members of the body of Christ, is in need of a neighbor, how do we know who our neighbor is? We know by what a person does, not by whom he or she is, or who he or she appears to be in our preconceived notions.

I remember a man, a stranger. I remember when he walked up the center aisle of a church ... this church. He staggered up here, his knees shook, and his mouth was as dry as cotton (although you may not have noticed). He made his way through the bell choir tables that day, and up into this chancel. You didn’t know him. He was a half-breed, born of a Jewish mother and a Lutheran father. He’d seen and done a lot in his life. Once he worked among the

American political elite during infamous times. Later, he had his hands on the technology that controlled the most fearsome weapons in the history of humankind. He had once endured a painful divorce, but was lucky enough to have been given a second chance. Now he was a scared seminary student beginning an internship in a congregation very far from home. Some might have thought him too old to begin such an endeavor. Others might have been frightened by his attempts to sing the psalms. The man was not exactly half-dead in a ditch, but he was in need of some neighbors to show him some compassion. He found 2,600 of them. And that man, this man, thanks you from the bottom of my heart.

In about a month, another unknown person will walk down that aisle in need of compassionate neighbors. I'm confident that Sarah will find them here too. But many others need your neighborly compassion. Some are quietly among us today and some are out along the roads you travel to and from this place. Put yourself in their place ... as you have put yourself in my place ... go and do something to love your neighbor for Jesus' sake.

Amen.