

Time after Pentecost
Vicar Barbara B. Pond

July 14, 2007
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

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

“Mom come see!” My family goes camping. Last year I took my two girls camping to a family campground that was local here. This was not our usual style of camping, but we were looking forward to some amenities like a swimming pool and working showers. The downside is that there were loads more people. I looked up and saw a young woman pushing a baby carriage down the path. My heart immediately went out to her. My family camps in a tent so we were in the section with the folks who loved “roughing it.” Camping with an infant gives a new definition to the term challenge.

The woman smiled as I greeted her with my heartfelt expressions of affirmation at her courage. I felt it was my duty to give her some encouragement. After all, I was a seasoned camper and, with a guess at her age, I figured I had a lot more experience to boot. I felt good that I was able to brighten her day. I peered around the carriage to find five parakeets fluttering around kept in place by protective mosquito netting.

Today in the gospel of Luke, Jesus is telling a story. It is a story that is as unexpected as five parakeets in a baby carriage at a campground. The story of the Good Samaritan.

What is so unexpected about the Good Samaritan? The story has trickled into our everyday language and American culture. There are Good Samaritan laws in our country. These laws are put into place to protect people who stop and help injured folks like the Samaritan in Jesus’ story today. Type Samaritan in Google and you get five million, five hundred thousand hits. There are countless hospitals and programs named with the Good Samaritan in mind. The Good Samaritan stepped up to the plate and helped the man when the other guys passed by. We all know we need to be Good Samaritans.

The story of the Good Samaritan has been sanitized in much the same way as the Nativity story. You know the story I am talking about. The story where Mary, after giving birth in a stable that looks as clean as an operating room is dressed in a perfectly ironed gown with every hair in place. Mary is kneeling beside the manger looking loving at her infant. I have to tell you, God’s son or not, after childbirth I could not have been kneeling much less looking so put together. Jesus is placed in a manger with straw that has the consistency of a down comfort, and Joseph is standing behind Mary looking serene and thoughtful despite the fact that he has just helped deliver a baby after walking countless miles. The story of Christmas has become a Hallmark card. The story of the Good Samaritan is not any different.

The stories Jesus told, parables, were not just stories to make a point. Jesus was a master story teller. Jesus’ entire ministry was about turning things upside down. The Good Samaritan is no exception. There are always parakeets in the baby carriage. So . . . maybe we need to read this as a story. We are the crowd, listening in on the conversation.

A Jewish lawyer, a faithful Jew who knew the Law of Moses well, comes forward to test Jesus. "Teacher," he says, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus answers, "What's in the law?" The man replies, "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." Jesus says, "You have given the right answer: do this and you will love." But wanting to justify himself, the man asks Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Now, the man is a lawyer. He doesn't ask a question for which he doesn't already know the answer. Of course, the answer is that fellow Jews are his neighbors. It is clear in the law. Jesus tells a story.

One evening, Suzy and Sam Lutheran, members of Trinity, left the Whitaker Center in Harrisburg after a marvelous theatre performance. Walking back to their car they are the unfortunate victims of a drug robbery. The thieves take Suzy's dress jewelry and in a rage stripped her and beat her senseless. They did the same to Sam. Their fine evening ruined, ending in tragedy and near death.

It just happens that Pastor Easton was in Harrisburg that evening as well. She saw Suzy and Sam lying there in the ditch and passed by on the other side. Pastor Hardy was also in town enjoying the evening with his wife Barbara. He, too, saw Suzy and Sam lying in the ditch and passed by on the other side.

A scruffy man, obviously needing a bath, and reeking of alcohol, thin because of his advancing AIDS diagnosis comes by. He sees Suzy and Sam lying in the ditch and is moved with pity. He finds a phone booth and calls 911. Soon, Suzy and Sam are being cared for in the ER at Harrisburg Hospital.

Which of these three, do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers? Go and do likewise.

How many of us see ourselves as the Good Samaritan in Luke's version of the parable? Yet, in our contemporary version, did you shrink away from identifying with the homeless man? That's the experience the first hearers had. You see in Jesus' time Samaritans were considered outcasts and no Jew would have had anything to do with a Samaritan. The surprise in Jesus' story isn't parakeets, but the outcast hero.

Another surprise! The lawyer asked his question about neighbors in the first place to justify himself. He wanted to know what the minimum was. How little did he need to do in order to get the prize; eternal life. Jesus' answer? You have to do it all. Everyone is our neighbor. Oh! Wait a minute, Jesus, EVERYONE is our neighbor? EVERYONE!!!!???

Jesus, if that homeless man is a prototype, then I'm cooked. I can't do that. I try and try and just don't measure up. And Jesus smiles. Now, you're starting to get it. The Lawyer wanted to justify himself. The surprise in Jesus' story isn't parakeets, but an outcast hero.

What happens if instead of the Good Samaritan we all place ourselves in the ditch with Suzy and Sam? What does your ditch look like? A long night of the soul where God seems far away, maybe even made up? A scary diagnosis from the doctor? An ugly divorce with lots of hard

feelings and insecurity? A pink slip from work? The death of someone special? Changes in the relationship with a child or parent? Financial mistakes? Betrayal? A broken heart?

And God sees. Jesus came to earth to show us how much God sees and understands. Jesus, judged and crucified as a common criminal, an unlikely outcast hero, sees and is moved with pity. We can be sure God understands our challenges because God came to us as Jesus and experienced all our challenges, even death. Jesus is there to see us in the ditch and love us into change. You see, Jesus loves us no matter what ditch we find ourselves in. And Jesus loves us too much to allow us to stay there. Jesus, our unlikely hero, picks us up and takes us to the ER so our wounds can be patched and our spirits revived.

That's why we're here today. Jesus assures us we will find power in Holy Communion and the support we give each other in our faith family here at Trinity. Then, we go out into the world and reflect the love God has for each of us by treating others in the same way. We can't justify ourselves. There is no minimum. Eternal life is a gift from God because we are insanely, relentlessly loved. That doesn't leave us off the hook. Our good works are a thank you gift for God's grace.

Each one of you has been a reflection for me of God's love and care. You have become my family and I will be forever grateful for the love and affirmation you have showered me with this past year. While I appreciate all the gifts and remembrances you have given me, what's more important are the memories and stories of faith we have shared. I am leaving this place a better person for having known each one of you. You will be in my prayers as together we share the story of God's insane, relentless love for the world.