

Proper 10 - 7 Pentecost – Year C – July 11, 2010
Amos 7:7-17; Psalm 82; Colossians 1:1-14; Luke 10:25-37
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A Kenyan writer for the Associated Press reports a remarkable story. A stray dog finds an abandoned baby in the forest stuffed like garbage into a plastic bag. Several witnesses report seeing the dog carrying the baby safely across a busy street and through some barbed wire fencing to her own litter of puppies. Child abandonment is common in Kenya, and not unknown in the U.S. The story cites poverty as the root cause of the problem.

At a glance, Jesus' parable from the Gospel of Luke can be neatly summed up as an admonition to help those in need. The parable of the Good Samaritan has become a modern-day symbol of those who help strangers and travelers. We even have the Good Samaritan law that prevents those who give aid from being sued for their trouble. There are other interpretations too, ones where the Samaritan in the story is Jesus, who gives of Himself freely bringing us to safety and caring for us. Some look at the surprising triad of priest, Levite, and Samaritan, and point to the astonishing kindness shown by the odd one out, the one that any first century Israelite would consider an outsider at best, and an enemy at worst. Is this parable just meant to teach us about loving our enemies? Is there more to it than feeling good about helping someone in need as the occasion arises, or reminding us that God's love crosses ethnic boundaries?

The passage is boldly explicit in the question posed to Jesus, the one that the lawyer has chosen to be his teacher. "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" The question is posed in classic rabbinical style, which is meant in one sense to test the teacher's knowledge and discernment of the issue at hand. Many of us will have grown accustomed to thinking of the lawyer as some kind of self-righteous prig who was determined to put the charismatic peasant in His place. Yet the style of the exchange demonstrates a sincere interest in Jesus' interpretation of the Torah as detailed in the *Shema* prayer from Deuteronomy and the commandment concerning neighbors in Leviticus 19:18. Both the lawyer and Jesus agree that these Scriptures capture the essence of the Law at stake in inheriting eternal life. We are all called to love God with our whole self and our neighbor as ourselves. The lawyer's next question is to request concrete advice to understand how to journey into a deeper intimacy with God beyond mere intellectual assent, in the practical aspects of daily life. It is a personal question of faith and grace in action. Jesus answers with a parable showing the lawyer that the real question for all of us is, "How do I love my neighbor as myself?" As we walk this road with the lawyer and Jesus, we too, must cross cultural and ethnic, social and economic boundaries. We too must demolish walls and fences, and seek clarity of vision despite a lifetime of prejudices. All this and more, to arrive in the corner of God's kingdom where grace-filled unconscious competence in the practice of loving-kindness, mercy and compassion is the rule, and not the exception. This is a place where we are willing to receive as well as willing to give, with simple gratitude, even when the source and instrument of God's mercy is as shocking to us, as the Samaritan's kindness is to the Jewish lawyer.

There is even a hint that we cannot be too smug here about our relationship with God in and through Christ Jesus. Even though we are clothed with righteousness by God's grace and by virtue of our faith in Christ, that God-given gift is the start of our own journey of growing in grace, exercising our Spiritual gifts for the common good, and sharing the wealth of God's love with joyful abandon. If we have barely reached out to brush our fingertips against God's love, we cannot presume to know what is hidden in Love's unfathomable depths. Jesus' challenge to the lawyer, to you and to me, is to constantly seek a deeper understanding of God with the wide-eyed wonder of a child, and the intentional curiosity of an adventurer exploring hitherto undiscovered regions of an exotic new world. To practice God's gracious compassion and mercy is to manifest one's character and disposition through the habitual mirroring of God's love. The priest and Levite in our story are schooled in God's Law. They know what should be done for the naked stranger

lying bruised, bleeding, and groaning in the ditch. Yet despite the respect and status they hold amongst their people, they do nothing except avert their eyes, and cross to the opposite side of the road. Their esteemed relationship as God's chosen and as teachers of the Law means little without tangible expressions of how God has changed their hearts and minds, and through their deeds of mercy as exemplars of the living Law.

When the law becomes gospel for us, it is like fruit rotting from the inside out, and dying on the tree. We become like cartoon caricatures seeking refuge in rules, too often human-made rules that justify us in our own eyes, but quietly conflate and choke the expansive and radically inclusive spirit of God's graciousness. For those who have made the law gospel, boundaries are set in place like giant icons that serve as hiding places, while in self-righteous piety we refuse to see the forest for the trees. For those who make the law gospel, discipleship becomes a series of dutiful activities checked off at the end of the day, rather than liberating freedom in Christ, and life-giving grace in action. Jesus changes everything in this story, so that He opens our eyes to see that the Gospel is the only law of our lives. When that is true for us, loving our neighbor is not just *seeing* the need, but *responding* with loving-kindness. We no longer consider the time spent as a nuisance, we give of our money and resources freely without counting the cost. The Samaritan sets aside all conventional boundaries and even personal risk, to give generously of his time and resources to help the man who was robbed and beaten. What defines the Samaritan is not who he is in his own mind, the opinion of the lawyer, or who we think he is in our own estimation. Each of these is like a stringy fragment that can be bent and re-shaped into almost anything we want. What truly defines the Samaritan in this parable is the fact that he is the one moved with compassion to help the anonymous wounded man lying half-dead on the side of the road. It is the Samaritan who sees and acts, who participates in God's characteristic mercy, towards the one in need, and not just when it is convenient.

The lawyer asks for concrete ways in which he can understand who his neighbor might be. Jesus explodes the question as He describes the Gospel as law, because anything He might have said, however expansive in language would be limiting and merely affirm the law as gospel. The parable is incredibly challenging to us for the simple reason that we too justify our Christian goodness and kindness by diminishing the Gospel of loving our neighbors into those I choose to help when it's convenient, or those I choose to ask help from when I'm desperate. That is **not** how Jesus defines our neighbors, nor how God would have us love and be loved in life-giving relationships grounded in God's abundant love. In order to begin to see with God's eyes, and understand the implications of bursting through these human-made boundaries and acting with the pure motive of divine compassion, Amy-Jill Levine suggests that we ask the hardest questions of all. In our moment of greatest need, whose face would we be most horrified to see standing on our doorstep waiting to help us? Whose help would we rather spurn than accept, even if we're in dire straits? On the other hand, whom do we diligently dehumanize and avoid, those we would rather avert our gaze from, than stoop down in the dirt to help? I am sure that we could all share a few suggestions, but just like the lawyer's question, this is a matter of personal growth. I'm sure that God will convict each of our hearts in perfect clarity the moment we find the courage to put down our masks of pride and ask the questions. The moment that we realize we too have a long way to go on our own road to integrity and truly loving all our neighbors as ourselves.

We sometimes say things like, "the world is going to the dogs." When we don't always do such a great job of loving our neighbors, the straightforward lesson of a stray dog in a Kenyan forest might be what we need to move from poverty of spirit to faithful intentionality. Giving the gift of God's loving-kindness is grace in action. Learning to accept life-giving gifts of mercy often creates surprising new relationships that build bridges instead of boundaries. Each offers us new ways of practicing God's graciousness.

Amen.