

Proper 10 Year C 2025

I was told a story by a friend this past week. We were talking about the state of things these days, the prevalence of cruelty in our culture. In spite of things, we agreed that in the face of a world that can be so very brutal, there are still good people. She told me a story of her mother. Her mother grew up in an abusive household; reared by a dysfunctional mother; the father absent. She was born at home, in a poor, working class neighborhood, and for whatever reason or circumstance, she never had a birth certificate. Years passed and the time came for her to move to Alabama where her daughter, my friend, lived. She had been a single working mom all of her adult life, and had saved enough money to take a trip to Paris, before she moved; a trip that had always been her dream... but she couldn't get a passport without a birth certificate. She called the Social Security office; she called her congressman; a non-person lost to the system; she finally called the California Department of public health to plead her case. Was the year of her birth 1937 or 1938? She didn't know for sure. The clerk told her there was nothing she could do, at which point my friend's mother burst into tears. The clerk gently tried to console her, and after a silence, she said: Honey, just give me a birth date, and I'll see that you get a birth certificate. Sometimes Love is broader than the law. Sometimes the rules and convention fail us, and we have to improvise.

Luke's narrative about the Good Samaritan, a story most familiar to us, is classical Jewish theology. I mean to say, it is nothing new to practicing Jews. Luke is very intentional about connecting Jesus' life and ministry to the tradition. And Luke, not unlike the other Gospel writers, is more concerned, not with personal piety, keeping the

Law, but with the faith of a people. Many scholars argue that Luke and Acts, the same writer, one narrative, is at its heart a story of the blossoming forth of the church. This story, the ‘good Samaritan,’ only appears in Luke, but as is the rest of this gospel it is a vignette onto seeing what the kin-dom of God is like; so very near to us, in our mouths, as the writer of Deuteronomy proclaims. But it is easy to make short order of this passage, because on the surface the meaning is clear, right? ...Who was the neighbor? The priest, the Levite, or the Samaritan? ...and of course we all know the answer... the Samaritan because he showed mercy. But there’s more to this story.

We’ve already talked about, a few Sunday’s ago, the Jews hatred of the Samaritans, the ‘half-breeds’ to the north... so that’s operative here for the audience.... Just a few passages earlier we see Jesus headed to Jerusalem passing through the heart of Samaria, breaking a cultural boundary... so Luke is continuing his persistent theme of crossing over, boundary breaking; taking up again the malignant problem of xenophobia.... This time, we have a Samaritan passing through Jewish territory, just a few miles from Jerusalem itself... this Samaritan, like Jesus, has crossed over, is outside the ethnic and cultural boundary.

Now some scholars make much ado about the priest and Levite passing by the half dead victim; that Jesus is condemning the Jewish hierarchy and establishment; its customs and its jaundiced insensitivity; maybe a little bit. But in truth, in the first century near east, it was taboo, ritually unclean, to touch a sick or wounded person, much more-so touching a corpse... so the audience would have had some sympathy for the priest and the Levite; after all they are Temple officials, and are duty bound to the Judean laws of

purity...The Samaritan, an outsider, shares the same cultural taboos and rituals as his Jewish neighbors, and yet he risks; he risks the taking care of the wounded man....

Sometimes, for the sake of Love the rules must be broken. Of course the twist in this story is that the Samaritan is the Christ, the stranger we are unwilling to trust.... I'm sure at this story's telling there was some squirming in the seats. But we get the point: The Samaritan is the Christ figure, sacrificing for the good of his neighbor, and we are to be like him. We are to do the same.

But in all my years hearing this story, and hearing sermons about this story; I've never heard mention, the innkeeper. The innkeeper, who is nameless and seemingly, as Shakespeare would put it, a rude mechanical character in this story... but I think the innkeeper belongs at the heart of the story's moral.... Innkeepers in the ancient world were at the bottom of the social hierarchy... most were seen as scoundrels... known to evict guests from their rooms in the night after receiving a better rate from a late arrival...many inns were also brothels... they were known to confiscate property of their guests, often protected by paid off soldiers of the empire....

So the audience is doubly shocked... this Jesus allegory is tied to a Samaritan and an innkeeper, both outcasts, hated untouchables, as it were.... They now protagonists in the moral drama. The Samaritan must leave the victim in the charge of the innkeeper... pays him what amounts to a deposit, and leaves... the innkeeper is the one, far beyond the call of duty, who must attend to the dressings of the wounds... wash the soiled sheets... monitor the bedpan... he's got the toughest job of all... and to boot he gives the Samaritan good credit terms.... So he is an equally prominent figure in this story.

The point I want to make is simply this: This ministry to the wounded, half-dead man by the side of the road is collaborative. Healing is a collaborative endeavor. This story is not about being a good, and merciful, and compassionate person. This story is about being merciful and compassionate and good *people*. We are stronger together. Love needs critical mass. Dare I say, there is no such thing as a personal relationship to God. God relates to us in community. In fact, I want to say that there is no such thing as being a Christian on one's own. Being a Christian means one practices the faith in community. Faith is collective believing and collaborative practice energized, sanctified, by the critical mass of community. In these treacherous times, brothers and sisters, hold on to each other; guard and make connections. The digital and artificial world pushes us into isolation. Our strength is to break the barriers that undermine the vitality of community.

So I think this text is about the church, after all that is one of Luke's chief concerns: being the church; ...that we can't do ministry alone.... And also, and most important, ministry is about trust, however tenuous.... And we live in a 'trustless' society these days. Look at our story: the Samaritan entrusts the deposit to the innkeeper, knowing the reputation of innkeepers, and the innkeeper, a Judean, trusts the Samaritan, knowing the reputation among the Jews of Samaritans, that he will return and repay him for whatever expenses he incurred.... The gospel, the Good News, lives and breathes along an axis of trust....and like love, trust is a courageous act of the will. If nothing else this story exhorts us to trust each other, in a distrustful world, our biases notwithstanding. Remember, Luke's action takes place on a journey... and one thing so very true about the

journey, is that one must trust the stranger.... Out of necessity, one must trust the humanity of the stranger along the road.

The Greek word for trust is the same word for faith. To be a people, and not just any people, but people of God; we have to have faith in the people we are given to serve, and faith in the people who accompany us in that work, which is the very work of salvation... and faith in humanity itself, the risks notwithstanding... that God is present in the risk of relationship. And in this frightening and troubled time of cruelty and failing ideology and dissolute institutions, perhaps it is simply enough to trust the innate goodness of people... in spite of the present evil of the powerful; the monstrous abdication of empathy. Perhaps in our very trusting; trust is engendered, restored to our world.

The great question of every age, and certainly in the present age of dishonesty, corruption and hyper self-interest.... The question is put into our mouths, and into our hearts.... Who shall we be as a people? And this question begs another question: who is our neighbor? And living in a democracy the question is all the more poignant and relevant. I don't believe we are called to live in isolation. I don't believe wealth and material success to be our reason for living. I don't believe we are subjects of manifest destiny: Exclusive, exceptional, entitled. I don't believe in might making right. In artful, courageous, and humble collaboration with other trusting souls, we are to take care of our poor; we are to give respect to the shamed; we are to welcome the immigrant as if one of our own family; we are to heal the sick; we are to share the world's abundance; we are to

heal the planet and be stewards of its sustainability; we are to bind up the broken-hearted.

We are to risk our lives for the sake of Love.

Matty, in a few minutes we will initiate you into a community that endeavors to live by mercy and compassion and justice. We claim you this day as one of us, a people, a people who believe that we are here on this earth to serve the greater good. You will meet along the way people who find that strange. You will be offered the promises of the false gods of our culture. But you will remain steadfast, because the Love of the people of faith, your people, will hold you close. To be a child of God comes with great responsibility... but that burden is light when shared by the community. Trust that with all your heart. So welcome to the life of God in this world.... Have courage dear one; you will need it. We together are destined for a noble calling... even if it means crossing boundaries, or breaking a few rules.