

Sermon for July 11, 2010 The Rev. Marguerite C. Alley

Do you remember when your children or children you knew reached the age when they were able wonder about and verbally express their inquisitiveness? It was a charming age. For about 10 minutes. Why is the sky blue? Why do elephants have trunks? Why are giraffe's necks so long? Why is that policeman flashing his lights at you? When my god daughter was 3 1/2 or 4 years old she began the why game with a seemingly simple question like "Can I go outside?" I would say "Not now". She would say "Why?" I would say "Because it is raining". She would say "Why?" I, being a teacher, opted for "the teachable moment" and would say, "Because, the weatherman said so". She would say "Why?". I would then opt for the time honored, indisputable answer "Because God said so". She always got the last word though and would respond with either another why or with "if God made it, it must be good, so I am going to go outside and get some good". Jesus must have felt something like that frustration when his disciples constantly asked him to explain his teachings. Perhaps more so because those to whom he spoke were not innocent children.

When folks hear "The Parable of the Good Samaritan" I think most folks think it is a pretty simple parable to teach. On first look, they are right!

At this point in the story, Jesus is headed toward Jerusalem. Most of the parables in the Bible come from this trip from Galilee to Jerusalem during the last days of his earthly life, so there is a real and almost palpable sense of urgency about them. The stories also stem from several verbal "attacks" by religious authorities trying to catch him in open defiance of Jewish law or tradition. This kind of questioning is sort of the 1st century version of "have you stopped beating wife?" No matter how you answer it you are in trouble!

In the other Gospels that contain this story, Jesus' responses are slightly different. Mark has the lawyer trying to trick Jesus into responding as a Pharisee so their position will be supported by this man who is so popular with the masses. Matthew has the lawyer trying to get Jesus to state which of the two great commandments is THE greatest. Of course, Jesus doesn't fall for that! In Luke, we see Jesus' real genius when he turns the question back on the lawyer to help him come to clearer understanding of the themes he has been developing on his journey from Galilee. You have probably heard it said or may have even noted it yourself, that most every preacher has but one "theme" and all of our sermons seem to encompass, explain, illumine, identify or expand upon that theme. Jesus is no different except that he has 5 themes that are consistently identified in his teachings. In no special order they are: "no matter how important you may or may not believe yourself to be, you are important to God"; "no matter how bad you have been you can still change and join the team"; "losing often is better than winning"; "a little goes a long way"; and "sooner or later we are all going to leave our bodies behind and move on". I suspect that Jesus knew that he was being challenged not by an eager mind, but by someone who wanted to trip him up and embarrass him. Still, he seems to have taken the question seriously, and after his initial hesitance to answer it out right, he shares this story to help the lawyer understand the mystery of God's encompassing love.

When I was young, we were taught that the Samaritan was the central figure of this story. I suspect that if we were to take a poll right now. Most of us would agree that the Samaritan still is the central figure. He is the one that breaks the law to help his fellow man; he is the one who crosses the line in the name of mercy and human decency. But you have no doubt learned by now that the obvious answer as regards Jesus at least, is usually not the one we are intended to find! Parables by nature are intended to turn our thinking upside down and to see things from a very different perspective. So the obvious should always be a little suspect! What I am about to say, then, might come as a surprise to you. I suspect it may be even harder if you are a man, because of our Western idea of what constitutes "manhood". One of things I came away with from our Pilgrimage time with the Lakota Indians is that they hold the feminine and masculine images of God in balance. In fact, women are MORE respected in Lakota tradition. Not in the old "southern" kind of way that suggests women are to be treated specially because they are fragile, fairer or weak, but in the sense that women are a more powerful force in the universe because we carry the ability to make life. For our men today, the idea that they are a unique balance of masculine and feminine characteristics can be pretty unsettling and our media and our role models do nothing to reinforce this idea. Men don't cry. Men don't show vulnerability, men don't show weakness, men don't pray and if they do, they certainly don't talk about it. Unless you are Native American! So gentlemen hold onto your hats and lets get back to our story.

If the central character isn't the Samaritan, then who is it? What if the focus of this story, the defining character is the one who is beaten and robbed and left on the road? What if he is the Christ figure, and not the merciful Samaritan? Well, if this is so, then once again, the Christ figure is a major loser, lying naked and helpless on the side of the road and then telling us to go and do like wise. As further evidence that the Samaritan is not the central figure, let's review some other of the more famous parables. Is the Prodigal Son more about the Father's love and forgiveness or about the sins of the son? Is the story of the Laborers in the vineyard more about the generosity of the owner or about the work ethic of the

laborers? Do you see what I am getting at? If in the Good Samaritan all we needed just an example of good works and good behavior, then Captain Marvel and Superman would be all we needed!

Maybe, when Jesus said “Go and do likewise”, he really meant you must allow yourself to be vulnerable. Maybe he meant we must allow ourselves to be outcasts, to be lost, just like the figure on the ground. Maybe what he was saying is that we must allow ourselves to be cared for by those we don’t know, those we don’t like and those of whom we might be afraid.

In a way, to assume that the Samaritan is the defining character devalues this story. It makes it just a children’s story. It robs it of its intensity. And in a real sense, it leaves us without hope. Salvation is not something we can attain by forcing ourselves to perform good deeds, or by meditation on Jesus’ words or the power of human goodness. Jesus is a mystery in human form! He is grace incarnate. We don’t meet him and suddenly achieve a new understanding of grace and then go on our merry way. Our understanding of love and goodness just isn’t enough! Why are there so many self-help books, talk shows and support groups about love? How to love, when to love, who to love, why to love.....Counseling offices aren’t filled with the victims of too much grace are they? Nor are they filled with clients complaining about the transgressions of total strangers! What atrocities have been committed in the name of “goodness” or the pretense of goodness? The Crusades were a well intentioned effort to spread the “love” of Christ. The extermination of 6 million Jews was an attempt to create a purified (and therefore acceptable to God) race that would hasten the coming of the kingdom. Goodness and niceness have nothing to do with salvation! Besides...nice guys finish last....and you may recall if you have ever been last....the view never changes! And good Samaritans usually get sued.

So then what is the real message of this time honored story? If good examples or role models don’t work, what then? The Gospel says exactly the opposite of what we think it does. So can we be saved by “bad” examples? If so, then we can be saved by either the Samaritan who, facing the wrath of his wife upon his return home, spends his hard earned cash on some naked loser by the side of the road, or by a savior who in an agonizing death gives up his life for friends who just a few hours before walked out on him and even denied knowing him.

In order to really understand the message of this “simple” parable we must first ask ourselves which of these figures, the Samaritan or the man on the road is the Christ? I think you will now agree that it is the wounded man on the road that is the central figure of this story. So, how, exactly, are we supposed to imitate that? I suspect that few of us would willingly place ourselves in harms way. None of us wants to walk alone, causally and innocently through the most dangerous part of the city and be pounced upon so that we can know what it is like to be left by the side of the road. That would not be good stewardship of our bodies, either. Perhaps, there is yet another metaphor for us in the story. Let me ask you this: In what ways do we avoid being vulnerable? How do we avoid giving up ourselves or revealing ourselves and being “naked” before others? How do we avoid assaults and beatings upon our “selfhood”?

These next questions are not intended as put-downs or as remonstrations for self-protective behavior. They are questions we all must ask ourselves, IF we truly want to imitate Christ.

***How many times have we swallowed a question or observation for fear of looking silly or childish?

***How many times have we wanted to, felt like or needed to cry, but couldn’t for fear of looking or feeling weak, or have used our ability to cry as a way to avoid answering deeper questions about ourselves or our true motivation?

***How often have we refrained from participation in an activity or discussion because we were afraid of being accused of not being ladylike, or manly, or because we are afraid of failing?

***How often have we been afraid to stand our ground on issues or ideas that are important to us because we were afraid of being criticized by our friends?

***Have you ever been afraid to go out and participate in an activity because of a fear of frailty and the need to depend on the kindness and strength of another?

These are **our** frailties, **our** fears and **our** defenses. These are what we must conquer if we are to be like Christ. These are what will leave us naked and battered and therefore truly able to understand the mystery of grace, the hope of salvation, and this simple little parable.