

Mercy, Mercy, Mercy, Mercy

First Congregational Church Branford

July 14, 2019

Psalm 25:1-10; Luke 10:25-37

Rev. Suzanne

In today's Gospel lesson from Luke, Jesus tells a parable.

Hear the word of the Lord:

²⁵Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ²⁶Jesus said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" ²⁷He answered, "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." ²⁸And Jesus said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." ²⁹But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" ³⁰Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³²So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. ³⁴He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. ³⁵The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' ³⁶Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" ³⁷The lawyer said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

To really understand just how outrageous today's parable would've been when Jesus told it 2,000 years ago, you have to understand the relationship between Jews and Samaritans. Imagine the hatred between Serbs and Muslims in modern Bosnia, or between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, and you have *some* idea of the feeling between Jews and Samaritans in the time of Jesus! Both politics and religion were involved. There was great contention. The Jews condemned the Samaritans as second-class, illegitimate members *of the same faith*; in response, the Samaritans had a violent hatred of the Jews.

With that said, please understand that it would've have been "proper conduct" for a priest and a Levite [part of a Hebrew tribe; Levites were often assistants to the priests] to *avoid* the dying man – contact with a dead body was understood to defile you. Priests were forbidden to be involved with uncleanness. They were just minding the law. But, the point Jesus makes over and over in his ministry is that there are occasions when the law needs to be secondary to compassion. Jesus, a learned rabbi who knows and understands scripture, turns the law on its head when he points out a higher law that trumps all other laws - *the law to love your neighbor as yourself*. Laws are good, Jesus would say... until you need to heal your neighbor on the Sabbath, laws are good... until you need to heal an outcast, laws are good... until a neighbor is running for their life illegally into your country. Sometimes, compassion trumps law.

In the story Jesus lifts up how an enemy Samaritan put his neighbor over purity laws, *and* is able to rise above bigotry and prejudice to show mercy and compassion for the injured Jew. What a sight - and an outrage - this would've been.

Which reminds me of a story I'll never forget on the TV show, "Grey's Anatomy": One of the lead surgeons, an African-American female, was faced with a white Supremacist EMT who was close to death due to abdominal injuries that resulted from a crash. He insisted on having at least one *white* surgeon in the O.R. so that the African-American surgeon wouldn't try to kill him while he was under! To get his goat, she called in an Asian-American surgeon! When they removed the supremacist's gown for the surgery, they discovered a huge black swastika tattooed on his stomach. It took the surgeon's breath away. The patient had not yet been put under, and one of the surgeon's assistants snarled, "If you were dead, the world would be a better place." You saw the African-American surgeon have to make the choice: Do I save this man or let him die? He was very close to death, she could've let time run out. But, she pulled herself together – you really sensed that she was remembering the physician's vow, "First do no harm."... *Show mercy. Even* to someone like this. She saved his life, but while operating on his stomach... she destroyed the tattoo! Who knows what happened to the man, if he went away a changed person from the encounter with his African-American surgeon, but it was the surgeon who was able to rise above bigotry and prejudice, which made her a good Samaritan.

When I read today's scripture, I also can't help but think about refugees. Particularly with the threat of immigration raids looming, maybe even today. This past Friday evening there were 800 vigils across the country and other parts of the world, organized by *Lights for Liberty*, a campaign to protest and hopefully end the detention camps on our southern border. One was held on the Branford Green and a few of you were there. We all know the arguments for not allowing immigrants

into our country, but our Savior and Teacher had so many things to say about welcoming the stranger - the entire Bible does, actually. Yesterday I was reminded by this passage from Leviticus: *When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. ...you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.* In our passage today, Jesus makes the law clear, love your neighbor as yourself. Well, who's my neighbor? - it's anyone who has a need.

I'm sure there's probably no *type* of person we'd pass by lying in a ditch. But, maybe there *is* someone we vehemently dislike with all our heart, soul, mind, and might.

A pastor wrote about this scripture and he included that progressive Christians need to remember who is also their neighbor: the ones walking around in Make America Great Again hats and driving with CT Gun Rights stickers in their car windows. It's the ones who demand their city authorize a "*Straight Pride Parade*" during Gay Pride month. He wrote: Yep, they're our neighbor, too.

I was thinking, the Jews and Samaritans are not unlike Democrats and Republicans - they're both Americans, but they condemn the other as being the wrong kind of American! Right? Jews and Samaritans were of the same faith, but condemned the other as having the wrong faith. [Later note: Or, think about Catholics and Protestants, or Congregationalists and Lutherans and Methodists, etc. - we all basically believe the same thing, but might condemn the other for not believing in exactly the right way.]

You and I would say that we value peace in the world, but peace isn't going to come about by being kind to our friends... *It's going to come about by letting go of hatred, and extending mercy to an enemy neighbor.*

When I set down my judgments about other people, particularly those with different politics from mine, mercy washes over me. Mercy feels so much better in the body than hatred. The Book of Hebrews in the bible teaches that *an enemy is an angel in disguise...* isn't that great - the enemy has come to help heal something in yourself. Like hatred. When we dig in and refuse to budge about an issue or some person, Jesus is watching. He's not going to keep us out of heaven for it, but he must hang his head sometimes and wonder why, when he died for us, that we can't lay down our hatred and revenge. Just hangs his head.

An adult child of a friend of mine didn't talk to his mother for three years because of a stupid comment she made. My friend had told her son that she didn't like his fiancé and that she wouldn't be coming to the wedding. She soon came to her senses because she didn't want to be cut out of her child's life, so she apologized profusely, but he wouldn't accept it. She made repeated attempts to no avail. When she suffered a stroke this past January, thankfully he reached out to

her. He could've very well gone his *whole life* estranged from his mother. This happens all the time in families. In churches, too! And, mostly over small stuff!

The thing is, we say stupid stuff sometimes! *We gotta forgive each other!* (yes, yes, look at everybody nodding and raising their hand - we just do - we say *stupid stuff* - we gotta forgive each other! - we're just human - we've gotta forgive ourselves - maybe we had a bad day, maybe your neighbor had a bad day - let it go - the problem is we don't often enough go apologize and admit we've said something stupid.)

At the bottom of the street we live on in Essex is a most beautiful cemetery that overlooks the river. It's called Riverview. Not sure why you need a view there, but it's nice for the living! When I'm worried, stressed or unforgiving about anything, all I ever have to do is look at those graves! Looking at obituaries and graves is grounding and humbling, and should make us get on with the business of love.

To pray with the heart of today's psalmist: *Help us to be mindful of **mercy**.*

I had this friend who was very difficult, and I'd complain to my spouse about her. Lori this and Lori that. He said the most marvelous thing to me: *It's a short life. If we take everyone to task for their failings, it's going to be a very lonely life.* Wow. Mercy, Mercy, Mercy, Mercy. *If we take everyone to task for their failings, it's going to be a very lonely life.*

Jesus said, "*Listen, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you...*" forgive those who say something stupid.

Let's do this - sometime today think about people you've failed to love this week - individuals or groups of people in the world. Silently call them by name and pray for their well-being - that they receive love, joy, happiness, success. And, you know what, *your* heart will change. Sometimes this works immediately - other times it takes several rounds of praying over days, maybe weeks or even months, but I promise it works! You'll be a new person, *and* you'll no longer feel the way you have about the one or ones with whom you've been holding a grudge.

Of course it can be difficult to love one another in church. Petty, or important disagreements can end a relationship between two people, or a group; or a church can become fractured, and people take sides. Here's one more exercise: Imagine if you were the one in the story in the ditch, and all of your other church friends for some reason or another passed you by - *I'm sorry, Frank, I have to go out for a cup of coffee* - but the one with whom you've disagreed at church, is the one who gets down in the ditch with you and picks you up.

It can come as a surprise, can't it, to find out just who your neighbor is....

Go surprise someone today by saying hello. Surprise them and say hello.

You know what we should do at FCC? Let's do *our* part in putting more *mercy between enemies* into the world.
Shalom.