

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
The Eighth Sunday After Pentecost
10 July 2016

Scripture readings:

Amos 7:7-17

Psalm 82

Colossians 1:1-14

Luke 10:25-37

There's probably a lot of history and difficult data that we can unpack about places such as Jerusalem and Jericho and what Samaritans were and what priests and Levites and Jews were, and that's there for us to look up if we really need to. I think there are symbolic realities that are important to us in this story today which we can identify better than by simply consulting historical data.

Last night I went to Jericho. After I went to the hospital I stopped at the home of the owner of Moscow who is sitting in church with us today - Donna Reaser. She said, "*I think its Joe Long's birthday today.*" You remember Joe Long, her friend who had a lovely year or two with Donna after they were both widowed and who died himself a couple of years ago. I said, "*Well, there's one way for us to find out. We'll go to the cemetery and look at the grave.*" Well, we got there and all they had was the year and not the day. But we did find out it was his birthday.

I think we can understand Jericho as the end of our lives and Jerusalem as the beginning of our lives. I think we can understand Jerusalem as the great mystery of human birth and Jericho as the great mystery of human death. And so it's not hard for us to read ourselves into this story. We are on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho and we encounter a priest, a Levite and a Samaritan. I think you and I *are* the priest or the Levite. We're the religious folk. We know what's right, we know what's wrong, and if we're honest we have an inkling of what might be wrong with ourselves because we have a bad attitude about Samaritans - if not right on the surface of things, somewhere deep in our being. In the being of all of us are buried prejudices - racial prejudices, gender prejudices, social prejudices, economic prejudices. They're there, friends. We know this.

Last week, you may remember, we talked about chimpanzees and bonobos. That would be like talking about Ruby and Finn perhaps. Beth Beh just bought a dog. Can you believe this - at *her* age? [*laughter*] A puppy this big and Ruby is this big. Well, chimpanzees and bonobos apparently look very much alike, but chimpanzees are a male-dominated and much more violent society than bonobos which have a matriarchal society and are way less violent than chimpanzees. The point I was trying to make last week, and probably did very poorly, was that those are our closest relatives. It seems to me what makes us humans is that we can make choices about being violent and being non-violent, and we can make choices about how our societies are organized as either patriarchal, matriarchal or neither. That's a part of what it means to be human - that we are neither chimpanzees nor bonobos, but we are made in the image of God which means that we have choice about these things. That, I suggest to you, means that we have choice about what is buried deepest and furthest in the bottom of our beings, our prejudices.

And so Jesus tells this story about everyone who is between the great mysteries of birth and death, about all of us who travel on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. And he talks about how religious people respond to the Samaritan. Now I don't know very much about Samaritans but they were quasi-Jewish, they were people who were subjugated, they were people who allegedly had the oldest biblical texts that the Jews used, but they were sort of political chameleons. They were oppressed people. They were people who were looked down upon. They were not acceptable, and they got in the way of the priest and the Levite doing their religion.

Now the priest and Levite knew how to do religion. So do we. There on the road to Jerusalem the priest and the Levite were going to do religious things at the Temple. And they knew that if they touched a dead human being they would become ritually unclean and therefore prevented from doing their religious duty. It makes you sort of admire and respect undertakers, doesn't it. To this day in orthodox Jewish communities there are certain people whose job it is to take a dead human body to wash it, dress it and say prayers and sit with it until it is buried - very rapidly before sundown that day or the next. What good health practices and mental health practices for the rest of the world. You see what happens to a deer carcass on the side of the road left unattended.

So on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho several people, two of whom are pretty much in agreement and one who is an outcast, foreigner, outsider, who has some relationship maybe as a quasi-Jew but certainly as an inconvenient sort, passing by a man who has been abused, beaten, robbed and left to die. Well, the religious people know for sure that they can't get involved or they'll get to church and they won't be allowed to do what it is they went there to do because they will have made themselves unclean, unrighteous, not able to be religious.

And that's where the gospel lesson starts today - with this question from a lawyer who's not trying to be nice to Jesus but to snag him, corner him, trip him up. The lawyer says, "*Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?*" Now that teaches us one thing about this lawyer. He wasn't Lutheran! Get it? I mean if Lutherans know one thing, they know, they believe, they teach, they confess that there is nothing any of us can do to merit, deserve, earn or otherwise have access to God's grace. God's grace is God's gift to all people all the time everywhere. At 8 o'clock Jeanette said that God has a place for everyone in heaven. The point being the whole issue of telling this parable starts with a shrewd person wanting to know what the rules are so that he could obey the rules and get from God what he earned or demanded or can wheedle or finagle out of God his own salvation. To hell with the rest of the world! Now if we're honest a lot of our religion, a lot of what we've been taught, a lot that we give in to ourselves without being very thoughtful is that way. I'm worried about me, my salvation, what happens to me when I die. To hell with the rest of them.

And here comes this problematic Samaritan who's not religious in the same way that the priest and the Levite are, who uses their scriptures, who is convenient politically. He is what he needs to be when he needs to be it - sometimes Jewish, sometimes not, always in the way, always being subjugated, pushed over, ruled by somebody else, certainly not clean in the way he needs to be to have a covenant relationship with God the way we do. He comes down the same road from Jerusalem to Jericho. We're all headed to Jericho, aren't we. We all travel the same road, don't we. We all start the same way, don't we. The religious people see someone in need and, because they have such a special relationship with God, they ignore the person in need on religious grounds. They have short arguments. They're friends with the lawyer, and their behavior is argued in terms of what they believe about God.

The Samaritan, on the other hand, only asks the question: What would I need if I were in the same situation, if I were beaten, robbed and left to die? I don't really care what you believe. In that situation my question is: I have a need. Can you respond to it?

Now I'll tell you a story. Last evening before I got to the center of the world in Moscow, I visited Ray. By the way, I was impressed with his room in ICU. It was extraordinary. When I left CMC in Scranton a woman was standing on the sidewalk smoking. She said to me, "*Can you take me to 600 Wyoming?*" I was not very friendly but I did say, "*I'll be glad to take you but you may not smoke in my car.*" The car was in the ramp so I said, "*Wait on the corner here and I'll pull up for you.*" I went and got the car. I pulled up and she started to get in the back seat. Well, I had taken all the junk off the front seat and moved it to the back seat. She said she didn't want to offend me with the smell of cigarette smoke on her clothing so she planned to sit in the back which was very sensitive. She had a plastic bag - you know the kind you get from the hospital with your personal effects. I said, "*No, get in the front seat.*" It became very clear very quickly that she was somehow disturbed. She talked and talked and talked and it was all complaining about how the hospital didn't do the right thing and how they didn't give her the right medicine. This was wrong and that was wrong. And I said, "*Well, you know, you can take care of yourself and smoking isn't...*" "*Well, I only had one cigarette.*" I said, "*You must be from New York.*" She had a New York accent. She said, "*No, I'm from Florida.*" I'm sure she was from New York. [laughter] But it is possible that as a religious person I'm wrong. But just on and on and on and on. I got to the address on Wyoming. I think it must be a group home. There were people out on the sidewalk. She got out of the car, and I confess to you I sighed a sigh of relief.

But it gets worse, friends, because after that I went to Wegman's for dinner where the getting is good if you don't cook for yourself. I bought strawberries which were inexpensive. Now I'm embarrassed to tell you this, but I thought twice about putting that bag of strawberries on the seat where my friend had sat. In a plastic box in a plastic bag, I

thought twice about it. Shame on me! I also was asked by my passenger what my name was. And I asked her what her's was. And I didn't pay enough attention to remember it. So I can't say to you, "*Remember _____ in your prayers.*"

There are in all of us prejudices that need to be confessed. And this week in our country we learned the name of some of those prejudices again. And they're all there. Prejudices about and against and for authority. Prejudices about and against and for racial identity. For economic equality, for gender identity, for unity of a nation that is deeply divided in its ability to love others who are different and always has been. It's never been an easy life for immigrants here. Everybody has to pay the price. There is in all of us a bit of chimpanzee. There is also in all of us the possibility of the bonobo. And we are not apes. We are made in the image and likeness of God, and you heard it in the psalm today. Did you hear it? Strange, strange words: "*Now I say to you, you are gods and all of you children of the Most High.*"

So what is Jesus saying to the lawyer who wants to justify himself? Well frankly I think Jesus has become a Lutheran. [*laughter*] Believe that your salvation is God's gift to you and to every other person in the world, that the gates of heaven are flung open, that God loves all whom God creates, and the challenge for us is to love one another. Now I know for a fact it's hard for us to like one another. But loving one another has way less to do with emotions and how we feel about each other than it does with how we treat each other. Even if I do not like you, I am capable, by God's grace alone, to pour oil and wine in your wound rather than to step on your face. I am capable of picking you off the road or off the beach or off the border and taking you to a place where you can get help for which I can pay even though you don't deserve it. And let's imagine that the person on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho was a Jew and not a Samaritan. The point of this parable is the question, Who is my neighbor? And my buddy Frank this morning made it very clear that the definition of neighbor has nothing to do with the other person. The definition of my neighbor has to do with how I see that other person, whether he or she is different, poor, black, foreign, illegal. The point is this: Is there a chimpanzee, a bonobo, or God lying in front of you. I may have given God a ride last night but I wasn't very nice to her. I did my bit. Big deal! And then I offered my strawberries to Donna. It takes a while for it to sift through.

Do you see where we are? We're not in the business of "*We are right and you are wrong.*" And we're at an extraordinarily beautiful moment in history if we grasp it - that all we have to do is start with a confession that we know this about ourselves. Shame on us. But that's not the end of the story. That's the beginning of the story because God says, "*Fine. Make it better.*" Make your religion look more like the religion of the Samaritan which wasn't very religious at all and less like the religion of the priest and the Levite. And frankly if heaven is filled with them, I don't have a ghost's chance in hell of getting into that kind of heaven, and I don't want to be, thank you.

Jesus makes it very plain and very simple and says, "*Look, you are loved by God fully, completely and sufficiently. So is the priest. So is the Levite. So is the guy beaten up on the road.*" Your religion should simply be: How does one who believes that - a Lutheran, an Episcopalian, a Roman Catholic, a Baptist, an atheist, a kook - how does one make that kind of confession of belief about the love of a Creator? It seems to me the only real way that confession can be made is in how we serve others in need, period. There are all different kinds of need. We know what it's like to be emotionally beat up and left to die. We know what it's like to be economically beat up and left to die. We know what it's like to be socially beat up and left to die. We know what it's like to be theologically beat up and left to die. We know what it's like to be racially beat up and left to die. We get it. We know, and the answer is simple. As you travel from birth to death if your concern is about your salvation, believe that it is God's gift to you and to the world and live your life as if you believe it. Live your life as if your neighbor is seen by you, in the words of the psalmist, as yet another god in need, and then you run the risk of looking like God to the other.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.