

Luke 10:25-42

Today, our gospel brings the story of the Good Samaritan into parallel with the story of Mary and Martha. Typically, these stories are considered separately, with different messages. The Gospel of Luke tells them back-to-back. So, what is the connection? Both stories are linked by the words listening and distracted. What distracts us from listening to God's word? What does it look like to listen to God's word? What is Jesus telling us to do?

So far, we know that Jesus is travelling towards Jerusalem. Along the way, he visited Capernaum where he healed a centurion's servant. He stopped by Nain, and raised a widow's son from the dead. He was anointed by a woman who washed his feet with her tears. Jesus has shared parables with his disciples along with the readers of his story. Jesus has calmed storms, and has gone back to Galilee to cast our demons. He has restored a young girl back to life and healed a woman. Jesus has set the twelve into mission, fed five thousand from scraps, and has foretold his death. God has transfigured Jesus on the mountain top, followed by his healing a boy with demons ... the list continues. In Luke's account of Jesus' life and ministry, no one is excluded – all are welcomed. All are needed to further the Kingdom of God.

The Mary and Martha story is the final note in a series of stories since the Transfiguration. Jesus enters Martha's house. Mary listened to what he was saying, while Martha was distracted by her many tasks. Martha was distracted by her duties

of hospitality, so much so that she neglected the presence of Jesus. It's not that hospitality is bad. It is expected. It is good. Mary, unlike Martha, was willing to break the rules and listen to him. So what distracts us in our world of distraction? What prevents us from listening to Jesus?

A woman allegedly went into a Thrifty drugstore in Beverly Hills for an ice cream cone. While she was ordering, another customer entered the store, but the woman was unconcerned and paid no attention to him. However, after she placed her order, she turned and found herself face to face with Paul Newman. Her eyes met his deep blue eyes. Her heart pounded and her knees buckled. She was speechless. Stunned, she slid her payment to the cashier, grabbed her change, and quickly left the store somewhat embarrassed. Outside, she caught her breath and realized she didn't have her ice cream cone. She turned to go back in and met Paul Newman at the door. He said to her, "Are you looking for your ice cream cone?" Still unable to utter a word, she nodded yes. He replied, "You put it in your purse with your change."

When was the last time the presence of God made you forget what was going on around you? Made you forget the dishes? Made you forget the ball game? Made you forget the bank account? Made you forget where you put the ice cream cone?

The key to the Christian life lies with our priorities: Jesus first – a living, growing, learning relationship, then everything else. The only way to really learn God's way and will is to spend some time every day, "sitting at the feet of Jesus,"

falling on our knees at the feet of Jesus, letting us get lost in brotherly love with Christ as we learn his way to live. It is the better part. Remember what the voice said from the cloud at the Transfiguration? “This is my beloved son. Listen to him.” What does it mean to listen to Jesus?

Last week, we found Jesus on the road again – travelling towards Jerusalem. Here we find another distracted character. What distracts the lawyer? What is going on in his mind? Is he distracted by a need to be righteous? Is he distracted by hatred for non-Jews? So, Jesus, in typical, non-direct fashion, tells a story ... A man, was travelling from Jerusalem to Jericho. This route is a dangerous one and the road is full of robbers. It is a place where cultures collide, a place that you want to hurry through, and pray you make it down the path safely. The man had been robbed, beaten, and left for dead.

The Hebrew scriptures command care for the most vulnerable, including the foreigner or immigrant: “You shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.” Surely, the lawyer already knows this. Nonetheless, his second question (“And who is my neighbour?”) appears to place limits on his circle of concern (and perhaps, on Jesus’ circle of concern). It is as if he were saying, “Yes, but of course you can’t mean *those people* are neighbours, right?”

If Jesus had told a parable for a Foreigner-Samaritan as the injured and vulnerable person and a Jewish Jesus-follower in the role of the helper, nobody would have batted an eyelash. Such a story would follow culturally expected scripts

and would confirm the lawyer's self-justification. But "culturally expected" is not how the parable plays out. Among *those people* (that is, folks-not-like-us) is one who turns out to be a hero. That reversal offers potential points of connection. It suggests a significant difference between Jesus' and the scripture-quoting lawyer's views of these "others." The reversal also offers clues about God's mercy, which often manifests itself to us in ways we do not expect. The traveller in Jesus' story is in no position to *do* anything. There is no cell phone to call his friends, no roadside assistance from the local highway patrol. He is beaten and naked, vulnerable and alone. Afraid. No safety net. He cannot save himself.

His situation contrasts that of the 70 whom Jesus had sent out at the beginning of this chapter. Their vulnerability was voluntary – no purse, no bag, no sandals, no food except whatever is freely offered. The traveller has had all these things stripped from him against his will. In both cases, though, life hangs on the generosity of others and the graciousness of God. Imagine hope crashing inside the battered traveller as the Priest and Levite pass by. Do we feel a sting of judgment in Jesus' portrayal of these "spiritual-and-also-religious" representatives? Imagine the injured one saying to himself as he watched the foreigner approach, "Please, God, not him. Please-oh-please, send somebody else."

Jews and Samaritans shared historical roots, but their respective cultures and religious convictions had diverged over time. Conflict was not uncommon. The Jews hated the Samaritans. They were descendants of the rebellious Northern Kingdom of Israel who turned away from the Temple and were later destroyed and diluted by

the Assyrian Empire. Now, they were nothing more than half-blood mongrel heretics. The hatred flowed in both directions. When a Samaritan village refuses to offer hospitality to Jesus, James and John want to respond with a heavenly firebomb. The impulse to destroy the other is not new, particularly in times of fear. There was plenty for Jesus' first followers to fear: eighteen people killed by a falling tower in Siloam, terrorist-zealots stirring up trouble in Jerusalem as well as in villages and towns in Galilee; a powerful government deploying armies to maintain order, ensure payment of taxes, and control the populace. First-century people would have known about protests against the Romans and ethnic clashes between Gentiles and Jews. It is into this context of fearfulness that Jesus speaks a parable of vulnerability and compassion as elements of God's mercy.

The parable itself is well told. We really do not know anything about the person who is going down from Jerusalem to Jericho. The story speaks of a "certain man." He could be a merchant or perhaps a priest returning home after performing his month of duties in the Temple. After he is stripped of his clothes, which might have given some idea of his status, he is left without a name, race, ethnic tie, or any other identifier. This purposeful move on the author's behalf allows the audience to see this man as "anyman". For us modern people, this man could be a black man, a police officer, a gay person, or a Muslim – whomever we deem as someone unworthy to help. Whomever ... we assert they are not our neighbour.

The priest and Levite are also distracted. Both make a wide loop around the victim. Could he be "bait" to trap them? Or are they simply afraid of acquiring

uncleanness? This latter would not really be an acceptable excuse, since the best evidence we have of rabbinic regulations indicates that preservation of life really is a priority that trumps all others.

In many story forms there are often three characters. It was common to tell stories like this in sets of three where the third character “gets it right.” So, after the priest and Levite have departed, the audience is expecting the third character to provide the contrast. Since the first two were from the priestly class, one possibility is that the next one along will be a layperson. Since, this whole story has been initiated by a lawyer, everyone was expecting a lawyer to show up on the scene. So when Jesus says, “a Samaritan”, there was doubtless a gasp from the Jewish audience. There was tremendous hostility between Jews and Samaritans. Yet, not only does this Samaritan show “compassion,” a term regularly used to characterize both God and Jesus in the Gospels, but he tends to the wounds, brings him to an inn, and then, if the story isn’t already stretching believability, gives the innkeeper a blank check.

Too often, we let the priest and Levite off the hook in this parable by suggesting that touching the wounded man would deem them unclean. However, besides moral standards of helping one in need, both the priest and Levite were at the least obligated by religious law to bury a dying man – they ultimately fail to follow what God asks of them.

Usually this parable is given a moral read, the logic for which rests on

something like, “If a lousy Samaritan can be a good neighbour, I suppose I can be one too.” That’s not what Jesus meant, and it’s no way to read a parable. The victim was stripped, beaten, and left for dead. Sounds familiar, doesn’t it? From a Christian viewpoint, if we think of Jesus as that person, then how do we read the story? Are we not forced to conclude, “We are the Samaritan?” Can you imagine any self-respecting Jew in Jesus’ day saying that? From this perspective, we are forced to conclude that being a neighbour is not simply a matter of doing good but of identifying with the last, lost, least, little, and lifeless.

From a Jewish perspective, a Samaritan would be despised and rejected, and in the story, he is identified as one who heals and who will come again. So familiar. Again, from a Christian viewpoint, if we think of Jesus as the Samaritan, then how do we understand the story? It means that we are the victims in the ditch. If that’s the case, then would we even welcome healing and salvation from one who is despised, rejected, and comes in a totally unexpected way? If we understand ourselves to be as good as dead, who will we want as our neighbour? Do we protest that it would only be over our dead body that we would recognize such salvation? Or is it precisely the point: only when we discover how dead we are that we experience the healing and saving compassion of God in Christ.

This same tension between helping and being helped appears in the Mary and Martha story. Jesus told the lawyer to love God and neighbour. At the end of the parable, he told the lawyer to “Go and do likewise” in showing mercy. Martha sure looks like the do-er and both in that culture and ours today – where she would be

commended for her service. Jesus is sympathetic to Martha and her busyness, but he is also very clear that her worries and distractions are not good.

So, did Jesus tell the lawyer to “do” with the awareness that he would never be able to “do” it right? Is Martha like the priest and Levite, so busy and distracted that she misses the needful thing? Was it a hard choice for Mary to sit and listen to Jesus and let Martha do all the work? Are we all in such denial of death that we think we can work our way out of the ditch in which we find our battered selves? Only one thing is needed. One part will not be taken away. Only one person has the words of life that will actually save us.

After sharing the parable, Jesus deflects the question back to the lawyer, “who was the neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robber?” The lawyer, deeply disgusted with the Samaritan race, cannot even speak the word in his response to Jesus. Unable to utter the word “Samaritan” the lawyer replies, “The one who showed mercy.”

True compassion always moves us to action. The Samaritan gave of himself to insure the best possible care for ... his enemy! That must have been hard to admit. Loving God and loving neighbour are not separate enterprises. To love God is to love neighbour, and to love neighbour is to love God, because God is the action of love. “Go and do likewise. Are you listening?”

The task for us, as followers of Jesus, is to listen and act, because listening without acting isn't listening, it's hearing with distractions. Lent is a wonderful time

to slow down and reflect on our own distractions. We can ask God to show us the neighbour to whom we can demonstrate love and from whom we need to accept love. Martha, the priest and the Levite were narrowly focussed on their role and what they had to do. It was about them and not anyone else. The key part of loving your neighbour is realizing there is someone else to love.

“Who is my neighbour” is no longer the question to ask. Ask anyone who their neighbour is and they will likely say “everyone.” The question is not a real question. The questions we need to ask now are: “How can I be a neighbour?” and “Why am I a neighbour?” We can be a neighbour by drawing close to people. Seeing them is always the first step. We do not have to endeavour to set out and do wild acts of kindness that save peoples’ lives, which can feel rather overwhelming. We have to set out to draw a bit closer, to see a bit more. Why am I a neighbour? - We need to realize that we have been in the ditch and received unmerited mercy before we will ever be willing to extend it.

Our gospel today advises us that we are to love our neighbour, “the certain man or woman” who is hurting beside the side of the road. At the same time we are to listen to God, instead of being worried with distractions determined by society. God does not need our busyness: God needs our devotion. It is out of this devotion that we are fed, and in turn can help those in need along the way.

The priest, Levite, and Martha are worried with distractions that keep them from truly following what God requires. God simply requires us to love God and to

love our neighbour. There are no ifs, ands, or buts about it. There are no excuses. It is simple. LOVE! The Samaritan simply helps. Mary simply listens. It is in these two that God's law's are fulfilled. It is within these two that love is defined, and ultimately wins in the end.

“What we do flows naturally from who we are.” When we are devoted to God, what we do is naturally love. These stories taken together, teach us the core of Luke's Gospel, and Jesus' teachings. They are centred on three themes: hospitality, the journey, and devotion. We are to love our neighbour and God. One is never complete without the other.

Amen.