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The 5th Sunday after Pentecost

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Go, and do likewise. These are Jesus' words that conclude today's gospel lesson. They are direct, concise and simple enough – words that call us to emulate the actions of the Samaritan, the selfless and generous outpouring of mercy and care for our neighbor.

As we go about living our everyday lives, much of our attention is directed to ourselves: our work or tasks that await us; the plans we make and the things we do. We need to tend to our own health and well-being, so that we can actively engage the world. Tending to oneself is not a bad thing, at all. Yet, if we become so consumed with our own universe that we fail to see that we are not only part of a larger one, but that in being a part of it we make up the whole, then things, and people, may fall through the cracks.

We hear in our gospel the commandments we, believers in God and followers of Jesus, are to follow and live by. The well-educated lawyer seeking an answer to the question of how to inherit eternal life, a matter of faith and how we live our lives, quotes rightly scripture from Deuteronomy and Leviticus: You are to love God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and love your neighbor as yourself. These are words found in both old and new testaments, words we as Christians know and do our best to honor, even if the “how” of the commandment can be difficult. We do our best to love God with our all, and to translate that devotion into love, kindness and care for other people. We know inherently we are called to love our neighbor. It makes sense. It's how a healthy community flourishes. We also know that care for the other doesn't always arise out of reason or rationale. If it did we, being reasonable people, would leave no person in need or want, untended or in suffering. Can we, by virtue of just making a decision, tend to the needs of each person we encounter? Our faith tells us we must try. It is the hope and promise Jesus speaks of, the passing on of the truest expression of the extravagant love of God we have been given: unconditional, merciful and selfless love.

The choice of whether or not to extend mercy and kindness to others is ever before us. Most of us have had some moment when we've come to the “fork in the road”, the moment when we are on one path, and another presents itself, and we are called to choose which way to go, or what to do. In such Fork in the Road moments we may find ourselves confronted, challenged, even afraid. Sometimes we have ample time to weigh our options, while other times our choice must be made quickly, without little thought or processing. The parable nestled into today's gospel lesson tells the story of three men presented with a fork in their road as they journeyed on their way.

Seeking perhaps to elevate himself, or maybe wanting to trip Jesus up, the lawyer asks a supplemental question of Jesus, a qualifying question if you will: Who is my neighbor. Jesus takes what could morph into a theological debate and shifts it into a teaching moment for not only the man but all who were listening, setting the location of the story on the long, dangerous road from Jerusalem to Jericho, that had come to be known as the “bloody pass”. It was a place familiar for robberies and ambush.

Jesus tells of a certain man who fell among thieves: robbed, beaten, left half-naked and in dire need. We hear how when first, a priest, and then, a Levite – esteemed Jewish religious leaders—encounter the man, rather than stop to lend aid, choose to walk away from the man, moving to the other side of the road. Then, Jesus tells of a third man, a man of another race, a Samaritan, who also encounters the man. Instead of ignoring him, this man draws near, sees the man's pain and suffering, and feels great pity for him. Through a thorough and detailed description of the Samaritan's actions, Jesus tells of what love of neighbor can look like.

While in Ireland last week, Peter came down with a sinus infection and was in need of a prescription. Visitors in a foreign land, we didn't quite know where to turn for help. There were no urgent care centers in the small town of Skibbereen, and going to the hospital seemed too much. We finally found a medical group that offered tele-appointments, and gave them a call. The receptionist was kind as she listened, gathered details and then assured me that a doctor would phone before 2 pm. We waited with anticipation,

and when the Doctor called, she too was gracious and attentive, and called in the prescription. We just needed to pop by their office to pay for the appointment (35 Euros) and to pick up the medication next door.

Peter and I were both in awe at the generous hospitality and care shown us in Ireland. We had been in need and they had treated us with neighborly kindness and generosity. Never was Peter made to feel an imposition, or that he was not deserving of care. We received the gift of hospitality that Jesus calls us to extend to others.

At the conclusion of the parable, rather than discussing “who” one’s neighbor is, Jesus reverses the question as he asks, “Which of the three were a neighbor to the man?” The lawyer, and likely all, could not deny the obvious. It was the one who showed mercy. And it is to this acknowledgement that Jesus responds, Go and do likewise.

We don’t know why the priest and the Levite failed to stop. We can’t be sure how we would respond in a similar situation. We do know, however, what it is to walk past someone in need; we can imagine the feelings and concerns that might arise. What if, instead of wondering what might happen to us if we stopped to help a stranger in need, we asked, “If I do not stop to help this person, what will happen to them?” This seems to be the question the Samaritan sat with, and it is the question before us today. What happens to our neighbor when no one stops, when we just walk on by? Maybe one begging for money will go hungry? Maybe one seeking shelter will sleep on the streets? Maybe we will never know.

As we weigh our own needs and desires against those of our neighbor, Jesus calls us to prayerfully consider this question. Our neighbor is not to be qualified or quantified, nor are we to try to contain our circle of responsibility when it comes to serving others. Who is our neighbor? The person that is right here, right now. The person we know and the person we have not yet met. The person we see, and the one that is invisible to us. Our neighbor is everyone, as we are everyone’s neighbor, and when we stand at the fork in the road and choose to extend mercy and kindness, Jesus assures us it will make all the difference.

God graces us with extravagant love and demands of us our all. Some days we will succeed in expressing that love generously, while other days we will fall short. As we strive to love and serve well, we may return to and count on God’s love for us – love that redeems us, guides us, and helps us each day to begin again so that we might be bearers of merciful love.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King called for a dangerous unselfishness – a willingness to try to put the needs of others ahead of our own, even when it feels uncomfortable. What is important is our willingness to try.

Along the course of your life in the coming week, you may come to a fork in the road. You may encounter a neighbor in need and have to decide how to respond. In that moment try to remember to ask yourself, “If I do not help this person, what will happen to them?” May the answer to that question help you to extend the most extravagant and merciful love you can give. Go, and do likewise.