

Luke 10:25-37 Pentecost 5 7.10.25 Bill Uetracht

(We begin by listening to an NPR interview with a Presbyterian pastor from Texas.)

I find myself deeply troubled these days by what happened in Central Texas this past week. The terrible flash floods that have killed so many adults and children have deeply burdened my heart. Life is filled with so much pain, such unfair pain.

As I have watched what the response has been to this horrible tragedy, I have been intrigued by the number of churches that have become involved in it and the number of pastors or religious leaders who have been interviewed by national news sources about their participation in the response and their processing of the meaning of the horror.

Oh, I know. The church doesn't always get it right. Obviously, the Levite and the Priest in our text who represent institutional religion didn't get it right. We too often walk around pain. Yet nonetheless, when the church is at its best, and sometimes it is, it moves into human pain. And the situation in Texas reveals that.

Richard Rohr in his most recent book suggests that all things have tears and all things deserve tears. In other words, pain belongs to every portion of creation. Paul says that the creation itself waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; the whole creation groans together as it suffers the pains of labor. The creation has tears. People have tears. Some religion tries its darnedest to suppress the reality of tears. It tries to pretend that life is only happiness and smiles. But we all know better. All things have tears. Human pain is real. The tears in Texas are more than real. The church, when it is at its best, cries lots of tears, heads straight into human

pain. If the central symbol of our life together is the cross, the supreme representation of human pain and cruelty, then the church that avoids human pain is not the church at all.

Our gospel reading for today highlights one who does not walk around human pain but stops to take it in and to address it. The story comes because a lawyer has approached Jesus to test him. The lawyer wants to know how smart this Jesus guy is. It appears that he wants to trip him up. After all, he's a lawyer, so he appreciates the intricacies of the law. Often, he is known for not wanting things simple. He likes them convoluted. So Jesus, what do I need to do to have the good life? Give me a convoluted, non-simple answer.

Mr. Lawyer, it's pretty simple. In fact, so simple, you know it already. You know what to do. You have been studying it. You have been repeating it over and over again in what is called the Shema: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength." And, Jesus adds to the Shema, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. It's that simple.

But Jesus, I am a lawyer. I like to parse things. It must be much more complicated. Can you give me the intricacies and subtleties of who my neighbor is. After all, the word "neighbor" means someone who is nearby, somebody who is from my little neighborhood. Is that what you are saying?

It's then that Jesus tells the parable of the so-called Good Samaritan. A man was going from up top (Jerusalem) to down below (Jericho) and fell into the hands of robbers. He was stripped, beaten, and put into a lot of pain. In fact, he was half dead. By chance, two religious officials were coming down the path at the time, but they both passed by the man on the other side of him. They didn't move toward human pain; they avoided it. I don't know. Maybe they had an

important religious meeting to attend. Maybe they didn't want to get ritually defiled by a man who was half dead. Who knows? But one thing is for sure. They were eager to step around pain.

But such wasn't true for the Samaritan man. He . . . Whoa! Hold on for a minute. This is not making sense. The Samaritans were the enemies of the Jews. They were considered half-breeds, since their Jewish relatives ended up marrying Assyrians, who at one point were brutal invaders into the northern part of Israel. So, let's tell the truth. There's no such thing as a "good Samaritan." They are all bad. So, don't go telling us that the hero of the story is a Samaritan. That is not in the realm of possibility—unless you live in Jesus' possibility or, for that matter, reality.

Dominic Crossan, an expert on the parables of Jesus, suggests that the parable of the Good Samaritan is not so much a morality story that teaches that you ought to stop to help someone out if they get a flat tire, but rather a narrative that upends "the structure of expectation." It unsettles, turns upside down, what we expect life and people to be like.

Who is my neighbor? Not simply the person who lives next door. Not simply the person who lives in my town. Not simply the person who is from my ethnic or racial or language group. Who is my neighbor? First of all, someone who is in pain, whose life cries out for a helping hand, a shared tear, a soft heart, a visit to the hospital or care for the wounds life has given them.

Secondly, your neighbor is every person. And note this. Every person is potentially a caring human being. Even your enemy is your neighbor and potentially a caring human being, someone who can come to your aid. In Jesus' world, the hierarchy of helper and helped is broken down. We're in this together. We are all called to love God and

neighbor, and sometimes that means giving mercy, and sometimes it means receiving mercy—giving it to and receiving it from expected and unexpected sources.

We are living in a time, like that of Jesus, when the unexpected sources are viewed suspiciously. These days, the strangers, the foreigners, the immigrants, the refugees are suspect. We have identified lots of Samaritans these days. Fear of the other is rampant. Well, it wasn't much different in Jesus' day. But Jesus doesn't operate in a fear-dominated economy. He lives in a world where expectations are turned upside down, where sometimes the insiders miss the point and the outsiders get it, where the hometown religious folks walk by the man in pain, but the enemy responds to him and is effusive, over the top, in his care for the one who is half dead.

In Jesus, it is a whole new world. Why? Because for Jesus, I am convinced, the kingdom of God, the world of God, is a world of mercy and love. For him, the universe is penetrated by mercy and love. For him, love is the beginning, the middle, the end of the story. So, life lived on the basis of rigid calculation, on the divisions that are so popular for us, on suspicion toward the other and the foreigner, makes no sense. What makes sense is love and mercy on our part, especially for those who are in pain.

It is quite simple, folks. Love the Lord your God with everything you are and your neighbor as yourself. And your neighbor is everybody, especially those who are in pain. We do our best work when we head straight toward human pain and when we are surprised by who we are going to help and who might help us.