

# **“The Difference Mercy Can Make”**

Luke 10:25-37

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus.

“Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Jesus said to him, “What is written in the law?

What do you read there?”

He 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.”

And he said to him, “You have given the right answer;

do this, and you will live.”

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus,

“And who is my neighbor?”

Jesus 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.

Now by chance a priest was going down that road;

and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.

So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him,

passed by on the other side.

But a Samaritan while traveling came near him;

and when he saw him, he was moved with pity.

He 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.

The 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.’

Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor

to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?”

He said, “The one who showed him mercy.”

Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

# **The Difference Mercy Can Make**

Luke 10:25-37

July 13, 2025

Rev. Michael P. Catanzaro

## **I.**

I finally reached my breaking point last week. I am not proud of it, but there it is. Less an acute issue and more a matter of the long term catching up with me. Yes, the Pastor is human. When enough is enough becomes too much, though, the camel's back will inevitably break. You can only get pushed so much before the only alternative left to you is to push back. So, I begin this morning by saying I am sorry.

As wonderful a story as this is, I simply cannot preach the parable of the Good Samaritan again. When I sat down to write this week's sermon I opened my computer files to the folder labelled "Pentecost 8-C; Proper 10; 15 Ord," the designations various lectionaries employ for this particular Sunday in the liturgical year, I had the realization I have preached what amounts to essentially the same sermon on the Good Samaritan no fewer than 11 times in my ministry. I have come to an end. I simply cannot do it again.

## **II.**

At least not in the same way. Which, right out the chute, means no lawyer jokes. Beyond the fact that we happen to have two lawyers in the congregation who are about as nice as people as you will ever meet (John & Brent) there comes a point when you realize saying things at the expense of others just to be funny is not really all that fun anymore. Moreover, if one keeps saying the same thing over and over again is one really saying anything at all?

We are all smart people. Even if we did not manage to get it the first time, certainly by 12th time we have a sufficient grasp on the admonition to love God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind, and to love our neighbor as ourself. We get it. Do this and we shall have eternal life. Enough said. Move on. So, today, rather than talk about what *we* get out of it, I would like to talk about what *others* get out of it when we do so.

### III.

Unbeknown to some, last week I offered two sermons. The one I emailed out to everyone, and the one I preached extemporaneously to those participating in worship in-person and via the live stream. By a consensus of those gathered that day, it was decided there would be no recording of the sermon or service posted on the website, as things got a little personal and emphatic.

One story I shared, though, was in regard to an experience I had during an internship after my first semester in seminary. It was an experience which helped me to begin to learn the hard lesson that rather being the minister I thought I *should* be, I need to strive to be the minister I was *called* to be. One who was not in Management, or Sales, or Research and Development, or Compliance, or Advertising but, rather, a minister who is in Customer Service. Period. End of story. Therefore, this morning, I would like to examine the Parable of the Good Samaritan from the perspective of Customer Service which is just another way of saying Pastoral Care.

### IV.

I have long been fascinated by how language shapes reality. and, conversely, how language is shaped but our inability to fully grasp reality. Over the years I have offered a few examples of this in various sermons: how no one dies anymore, they “pass”; the proliferation of “up-speak” which presents everything with uncertainty or as a question the speaker is afraid to answer; and the relentless use of words and phrases such as “like” (is it really that thing, or is it only *like* that thing?), “I mean” (meaning what?), and “you know what I mean?” (clearly not if you have to ask).

Over the past couple years at this church I have noted the increased use of the term “Pastor”; often times said not as “*the* Pastor,” or “Pastor Mike,” but just “Pastor” as if it was an office or a role that mattered rather than the specific person occupying that office or fulfilling that role. Though I had never been necessarily enamored of that particular title, of late I have decided to stop my fussing and just *go* with it.

## V.

The noun “Pastor” comes to us from the Latin verb “*pascere*” which means to lead to pasture, to set to grazing, to cause to eat. At which point it is but a small leap to the title “Shepherd”; especially given the numerous scriptural references to Jesus being the “Great Shepherd.” While “Pastor” is a fitting term to denote one who tends to a flock, where the analogy breaks down is in how sheep are added to the flock.

In the real world of animal husbandry the shepherd decides to add to the flock through breeding or by purchase. In the ecclesiastical world, however, each sheep decides for *itself* whether it will venture into a particular flock and, perhaps, to join or be joined to that flock, and, of course, whether they choose to remain with that flock. Said another way, the shepherd of the *pasture* grows the flock by intention and design, while the shepherd of the *pews* must constantly adapt, and adopt the flock, to whatever new sheep are added or depart. It is at this point that things get a little tricky.

## VI.

Tricky not just for the shepherd, but for the flock as well. Eventually, some criteria must be formed or established, some rule to guide, some perspective taken, as to the nature, role, and composition of the flock. Which is either a *really* hard and complex thing to do, or something which is *ridiculously* simple though seldom easy.

While the shepherd is in a position to relate to this quandary as it is presented to the flock, or congregation, the more challenging task is for the flock to understand how the quandary presents to the shepherd, or Pastor. This is certainly true in general terms, but also with regard to the specific and particular kind of Pastor he or she understands themselves called to be. Not to mention the One they understand to be doing the calling. For me, personally, it all comes down one thing: not those who we happen to pass by but, rather, those who happen in.

## VII.

For the past 27 years, people have been happening into this church and, now, have become this church. This includes me and my family. We all have a story as to how we have come to be in this place and time in our lives. While

some stories are certainly joyous, usually as a result of starting a family, many stories arise from struggle, misfortune, and hardship. Regardless of the nature of the story, however, I very much believe one thing to be true: *no one* arrives at a church by accident. God has a purpose for each one of us in finding our way, or happening in, to a particular church. While this may mean certain things to the flock or congregation, what it means to the shepherd or Pastor is an assumption of the responsibility for caring for another of God's sheep while, at the same time, caring for the entire flock which, now, has been come new or different in whatever way in keeping with God's ordering of the world.

### **VIII.**

In other words, it is a mystical thing. While the shepherd does not necessarily know where God is leading a particular person in their lives, it becomes the shepherd's responsibility to support that person in such a journey, regardless of how easy or hard this may be, as *their* journey now becomes *our* journey. As has been the case case with each one of you. This is what it means to be the body of Christ. Not only does God have a plan for our lives, God has a purpose in who God is making us to be as a community of faith and spiritual body.

While it might be case that only one or two of us may happen upon a person who has literally been beaten, stripped by robbers, and left for dead by the side of the road, every single one of us has had the metaphorical experience of such a lost or beleaguered person dragging themselves from the roadside of their lives and happening into *those* doors and into *our* lives. Which, we can only assume, is by God's providence.

### **IX.**

It is at this point that we, as flock and shepherd, have a choice to make. Will we take the position of the lawyer in the Parable of the Good Shepherd, that as defenders of the religious law, our obligation to love the neighbor extended only to those *like us*? Will we be like the Priest or Levite, both of whom purposely pass by on the other side of the road even though the Hebrew Scripture spells out the specific religious responsibilities such people have in attending to the wounded and afflicted? Or, will we be like the Samaritan who, though uniformly despised and considered totally "other" nonetheless

takes pity on the person, bandages and treats their wounds, puts them on their *own* animal, takes take to a place where they can be cared for, while also paying the cost for that care whatever it may be?

## **X.**

When he Jesus finishes telling the parable he asks the lawyer, “Which of these three was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” The lawyer replies, “The one who showed him mercy.” To which Jesus says, “Go and do likewise.” In the Greek, ἔλεος (eleos) meaning mercy, compassion, pity.

In the 9th chapter of Matthew’s Gospel we find Jesus “having dinner at Matthew’s house, (and) many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples.” When criticized about this, Jesus said: “*It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice. For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.’*” While we all might see the obviousness of only the sick requiring a doctor, and the hope to be found in Christ calling sinners rather than the righteous, it is the middle statement that intrigues.

## **XI.**

When we apply Jesus’ challenge to “go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice,’” to the parable of the Good Samaritan, we realize that we *need* not, moreover we *should* not, sacrifice ourselves materially, morally, or in principal as a means to offer mercy. A mercy that requires as much is really no mercy at all, but a sacrifice.

That said, the act of offering mercy (to others as well as to ourselves) always counts not only a real world cost, but also requires that we soften our hearts such that we begin to not just love our neighbor as ourselves, but to see ourselves in our neighbors. In doing so we discover *they* are just like *us* however different they, or their lives, might be from us and ours as we are all God’s children.

Do not be fooled or misled, having mercy for others is always the harder path to follow and, hence, usually the road not taken. It certainly makes all the difference, however, whenever we chose to offer mercy.

## **XII.**

I would like to end today with a challenge. Or, more accurately, to renew the challenge Jesus presents to all of us: to go and learn what it means that Christ desires mercy, and not sacrifice. Find a place and moment this summer where you might offer mercy to someone in your life, or one who crosses your path, or a person who would be all too easy (and easier) to simply pass by. If you have trouble imagining such an occasion or situation, I would suggest you make a visit to a nursing home or to someone who is homebound. Discover the difference mercy can make. Amen.