

Pentecost VII (10c)
Lk 10.25-37
July 11, 2010
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It is a rather interesting confrontation. A lawyer “stands up” to put Jesus to the test. And by lawyer, we need to understand that this man is an expert in the Law of Moses... a sort of combination of Canon Lawyer and Theologian rolled into one. His posture shows respect, but his tone is snide and condescending

Jesus has none of the lawyer’s credentials. He is a “self-taught” Rabbi. But he has been drawing crowds, and his words have gone straight to the heart of his hearers. He evokes in them a response that ten thousand doctors of the law could not. Perhaps the lawyer felt threatened. Perhaps he actually believed that he could expose Jesus as a fraud.

And so he asks his question. Jesus responds with his question. And eventually, we are led to the parable... the heart of the story.

The setting is the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. Everyone would have known it. It was notoriously dangerous. It was only 17 miles long, but in the 17 miles the elevation dropped 3000 feet. That’s almost impossible for *Low Country* people even to imagine...

But it would not have been hard to imagine that a man walking alone on that road was beaten and robbed. It was just like it is for us listening to the evening news. Someone is beaten and robbed everyday. We wish that it were not so, but we are hardly surprised.

And then we are introduced to the first in our cast of characters... the first of “three” who venture down the road.

Jesus was a master storyteller, and we can imagine that he deliberately invoked images that would “hook” his audience. And we can be well-assured that upon the mention of a priest, they were riveted. For you see, priests weren’t really that *popular*. Most people were poor, and walked everywhere they went. But the priest, pleased with his lofty position, rode his mount, looking down on the ordinary folk from his perch above them. At least that’s how it seemed to the common man.

And so when Jesus states that priest passed the poor beaten man, and rode on by, it is certain that many in the audience exchanged knowing glances. Maybe there was even a chuckle or two. What else would you expect?

Now, from the perspective of the priest, it was a little more complicated. There were strict laws about behavior... laws that our lawyer-friend certainly knew about. What if the beaten man in the ditch was already dead? The law said that you could not get within 4 cubits of a corpse without becoming ritually defiled. Could he risk it? If he had done so, and the man *was* dead, then the priest would have had to stand at the Eastern Gate of the Jerusalem with all the ritually unclean. As a priest who was supposed to know better, he would have been humiliated. And during the time of his defilement, he could neither collect tithes nor distribute them. He would suffer. His family would suffer. His friends and dependents would suffer.

It costs a great deal to take the kind of risks Jesus calls us to. And we may very well sympathize with those who find themselves unable to manage it.

The priest looked straight ahead and never even slowed down.

He was followed by a Levite. Now priests were descended from Aaron. They were of the upper class. Levites were liturgical assistants... not quite so lofty... and they walked, just like everybody else.

And so the Levite, on such a steeply sloped road, would probably have seen the situation as it unfolded in front of him. What would the priest do?

Isn't it interesting that many of us can find our courage if there is just one person ahead of us to take a little initiative. And isn't it telling that we will often settle for the mediocrity of those who lead us?

The priest did not stop. So why should the Levite? One deed speaks louder than a million words.

And finally, we meet the Samaritan. May I suggest to you that he is a man in the wrong place. He is a long way from home, and none of the people he meets on the Jerusalem-to-Jericho Road is likely to be kindly disposed to this hated half-breed heretic.

And yet, as we know the story so well, we know that it was the Samaritan who stopped. Now remember, the law of Moses applied to him as well. He risked the same ritual defilement. His religion had most all of the same rules. And yet his compassion overflowed, and his generous spirit was spent in loving his neighbor. He poured on oil and wine... fulfilling sacramental functions... since clearly the priest had not done his duty... He carried the man to a safe place. He paid generously for his well-being. And here is the most shocking thing of all.... as a hated Samaritan amongst Jews... he *gave up his anonymity* by offering to return if necessary.

He is clearly the hero of the story. The audience is shocked. The lawyer is silenced. And two millennia of Sunday School children have a clear image of the good guys and the bad guys. It is one of those great "reversal" stories... and having heard it, we all are prepared to live happily ever after.

But not so fast...

In his fascinating book, *The Tipping Point* Malcolm Gladwell describes an experiment that was conducted among Seminary students at Princeton University. First they were interviewed as to why they had chosen the ministry as a vocation. Was it because they wanted to help people? Were their hearts filled with empathy and a desire to make the world a better place? Was it because they had a hunger for truth and the discipline of theology? And then, after the interview session, they were told that they were to prepare a short talk on a passage of scripture. Some were given the topic of today's Gospel... The parable of the Good Samaritan... others were given other passages of scripture as a topic. And then came the test: They had to walk from one building to another, where the talk was to be given. And, yes, you have already guessed it... in the alleyway between the buildings, actors, posing as victims (those beaten and abandoned) were strategically placed.

Now one would think that there would be a fairly high degree of correlation here. Would you guess that the students who had listed compassion and empathy as their motives for going into the ministry would be the most likely to stop? But no, that was not the case. One would also think that those who were on their

way to give a talk on the Good Samaritan would be inclined to practice what they preached... but wrong again.

There was one more control factor. Just before being sent to give the talk, the examiner looked at his watch. Half the students were told, *Oh my, you are late. They were expecting you a few minutes ago.* The other half were told, *it's not quite time for you to begin, but you might as well go on over.*

And yes, I am afraid to say it, it was the half who were told that they were late who stepped right over the victims. Somehow, the need to please authority figures... or not disappoint them... or perhaps to live within their own compulsion for punctuality...overshadowed their ordinary inclinations for compassion and kindness.

Well, of course, this is an interesting little experiment in and of itself. But I tell it here for a particular reason: If we think that the point of the parable of the Good Samaritan is simply, *Try harder. If you want to be a Good Neighbor... like Nike... Just do it...* If we think that is the point, we have utterly, utterly, utterly missed the mark.

Is there something else Jesus would have us know? Is the point simply that we are to be risk-takers and good-deed-doers? Well that is a part of it, of course, but it would hardly be a very original story, if that's all we took away from it. We could have the same lesson from Confucius or Buddha or Gandhi.

What is really the main point?

Let us go back and look at the man in the ditch. Who is he?

When you get right down to it, the only way we can really distinguish ourselves from one another by class and our station in life is how we dress... and how we talk.

But what can we tell about a naked man in a ditch, beaten senseless?

Who is he?

I would suggest that we shall meet him again...

Beaten.

Bruised.

Naked.

Is it nothing to you, all who pass by? Have you ever seen sorrow like my sorrow?

For he was wounded for our transgression. And by his stripes... we are healed.

Yes, we are indeed called to take great risks and to love generously... but we are only enabled to do so... because we have been loved beyond our deserving.... By the greatest risk-taker of all.

+++AMEN.