

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
July 15, 2007

Pastor Jim Stickney

I first came to St. John's a year ago in early July, to meet with the Vestry and interview to be your interim pastor. I checked out the directions carefully, and got here early enough to sit in the sanctuary and pray a little while. I also brought along a meditation bell with me, & found the bells you've been using to mark that period of silent reflection after the readings and sermon.

But what if things had been different that evening? What if I had come across an accident and stopped to help someone? What if some people noticed that I had on the uniform of a priest and asked me to go to the hospital with them? Perhaps my response would have been, "Well, I can't help you right now – I'm interviewing for a position in a nearby church, and I don't want to be late!" Or perhaps I would have said "yes" to the crisis and gone to the hospital. I might have missed the meeting entirely, or at best been quite late. Either way, I'd tell the Vestry about my decision to view the interview as secondary to the immediate human need. And if you were on the Vestry, what would **you** do? Would you think, "that's just the kind of priest we want?" Or would it be, "well, this person didn't make an impression of reliability – he could have called!"

The story we hear in today's Gospel reading is perhaps the most famous parable, at least if you think about how our culture refers to "good Samaritans" hardly realizing that the origin of the phrase is only found in Luke's Gospel. Laws have been enacted to protect volunteers from being sued if they help someone who is injured. They're intended to reduce bystanders' hesitation to assist, for fear of being prosecuted for unintentional injury or wrongful death. These are universally known as "Good Samaritan" laws. Or maybe you've seen a motor home with a logo of a guy smiling under a halo with the words, Good Sam. The Good Sam Club got its start decades ago when a handful of RV owners put Good Samaritan bumper stickers on their RVs so fellow members would know they could get help on the road.

All of this good press for Samaritans distracts us from the real impact of Jesus' story. The Jews of Jesus' day lived in three districts. The Judeans, around Jerusalem, were the elite, close to the Temple, and viewed themselves as the most faithful Jews. Way up in the north were the Galileans around the well-known lake. Judeans in the south allowed that the Galileans were real Jews, but were they rustics, country people, first-century hillbillies living far from the Temple. But in between was the area called Samaria, where Jews intermarried with pagans, and worshipped on a mountain called Garizim, not at Mount Zion's Temple! Samaritans were heretics, and orthodox Jews wanted nothing to do with them.

To retell the Good Samaritan parable in today's terms, we need to know that the road where the robbers ambushed the traveler started on Mount Zion (about 2,500 feet above sea level) and by a series of switchbacks descended to Jericho (about 800 feet below sea level). That's a 3,300 foot descent. Mount Diablo is almost 3,900 feet high. Give or take 600 feet, it's almost

the same descent – or climb. By the way, I can't help but think that the reverse route, Jericho up to Mount Zion, is like the routes cyclists tackle when the Tour de France enters the Alps. Will we ever see a Tour de Israel, from the Golan Heights to the Dead Sea, ending up with a time-trial with a mountain stage from Jericho up the switchbacks to Jerusalem?

Anyway, this mountain road has numerous switchbacks as it descends. On one of these hairpin turns some bandits lurk, and pounce on the poor traveler. But here comes a priest, climbing up the mountain on his way to Temple. I know just how he feels – *my flock is counting on me to show up, don't get involved with some kind of rescue when I don't know the first thing about treating wounds.*

But then the Levite sees the carnage. Levites are assistants in the temple. These are the lectors and acolytes, the altar guild and coffee hour folks – we're all counting on you to show up, so you can't possibly stop to help, right?

But what's this? an illegal alien in a old pickup truck sees the wreckage. *Ay! Qué terrible! Qué lastima! Señor, tal vez yo puedo ayudar usted, no?* He manages to put the bleeding man into his truck and drives him to an emergency room, where EMT technicians rush out and start treating him. But hospital security gets curious. Did the truck driver have anything to do with hurting this traveler? Where's his ID? Ah, he's an uninsured motorist! Police are called, and then "la migra," immigration authorities deport him. There's the good Samaritan Jesus wants us to imitate!

Why did Jesus tell this powerful story in the first place? It's only found in Luke. As in Matthew and Mark, Jesus is asked about the greatest commandment. Scholars of Jewish law had derived hundreds of regulations from the Bible, so the question is really about which requirement was most important. Jesus's solution was to combine two existing Scripture passages in a balance: Loving the Lord our God with everything we have, heart, soul, strength and mind; and then loving our neighbor as ourself. That's the theory, in the abstract. But only in Luke is Jesus asked a legal followup question: define "neighbor". And which of these three, do we think, was a neighbor to the needy?

Perhaps I should just end the sermon here. But something impels me to add another perspective that makes it all more ambiguous. I went to You Tube and typed in "Good Samaritan." Among the array of student retellings, I found "The real hustle - the Good Samaritan." Someone pretending to need crutches appeals for help as he's descending a staircase. A young man lends him his arm, but by the bottom of the staircase the good Samaritan's watch is missing.

They re-play the footage to show just how the theft is staged. It's a cautionary tale about how getting involved without prudence can make us victims of crime. So – does that mean we should walk past human need? I certainly don't think so. But it does mean we need to make sure we're really loving ourselves so that we can love God and our neighbor without

forgetting about ourselves. We know that this triple commandment is far from easy, and we will find ambiguities along the way. We will make mistakes in loving. But love anyway. Love God with everything you have, and yourself as you love your neighbor.