

The Rev. Gabriel Lawrence

The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Amos 7:7-17, Psalm 82, Colossians 1:1-14, Luke 10:25-37

St. Paul's Episcopal Church

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I had the great privilege of serving as chaplain at this week's summer camp session at Bellwether Farm. I had not been to summer camp since I, myself, was a kid, and it was so fun getting to spend the week with about 40 kids, counselors, and staff. Needless to say, a week at summer camp gives a preacher much inspiration with which to write a sermon. After reading the Gospel lesson for today, the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, I couldn't help but think of one story, specifically, from this week. During one of the chapel sessions, I and the kids talked about Jesus as the Good Shepherd- the shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep, who seeks out lost sheep, who tends to the needs of those in his flock. I encouraged the kids to think about how they, inspired by Jesus our Great Shepherd, might shepherd each other during the week- how they might help and encourage and tend to the needs of each other. And throughout the week, I saw them helping each other harvest onions on the farm, encourage each other when making some from-scratch pizzas in the teaching kitchen, and praying for each other when we got stuck outside in a thunderstorm with rain pouring down and anxiety high.

This idea of helping those around us is at the core of our Gospel passage today. In the reading from Luke, Jesus tells us the story of perhaps the most famous character from a parable- the Good Samaritan. We hear in the passage about this person on a journey who is assaulted by a group of robbers. Laid low by the wayside, we then hear about different people who walk past him but do not offer to help. Then a Samaritan walks by and offers to tend to the victim's wounds and even provide a place for him to recover to full health. In this story, at least one point is clear- we are to care for those around us, even to the point of walking alongside those who are in need while they get back up on their feet. We even learn that we are to be extravagant in this action, providing shelter and food and support for those in need. We are to care for those in need.

There is another point here, though, that might not be as clear. And to get to this point, we have to look at the question that prompted Jesus's telling of this parable. The man to whom Jesus was speaking asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus doesn't tell this story admonishing that we care for those in need just to teach an important moral lesson, though he does that, too. He tells this story to get at the heart of the matter- identifying who is our neighbor.

You see, for as long as we human beings have been "human-ing," we have struggled with this. Being tribal creatures as we are, we tend to group ourselves with others who see things the way that we do,

with people who support our biases, frankly, with people that “understand us” and people that we “understand”. And within this group, these are the people we often justify helping or feeding or clothing or healing. But Jesus pulls us out of this mindset with this story.

You see, the Jews and the Samaritans did not get along. And that is, perhaps, the most important detail of context pertinent to Jesus’s telling this story. The man asking Jesus, “who is my neighbor” and anyone else standing around listening, would have been shocked to hear the words that followed- that it was the Samaritan that stopped and helped this poor man beaten up on the side of the road. Ancient Samaritans enacted violence against many people, and especially the Jews. To put it shortly, the Jews and the Samaritans were enemies. They did not get along. And so, in Jesus’s story, for the Samaritan man to be the one who stopped and helped, this would have up-ended the biases and preconceived ideas Jesus’s listeners would have had about this Samaritan helper. Jewish New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine comments on this shocking detail: “It’s easier to make our enemies clear. We don’t want our enemies doing nice things — that just screws up the relationship. If our enemies start showing niceness and compassion to us, that messes up our categories. ... But that’s exactly what the Samaritan does.” In this parable, Jesus answers the question “who is my neighbor?” with this answer: Your neighbor is not just the person who fits into your tribal category, whatever that is. Your neighbor is also those outside of your tribe. And he took it even a shocking step further by teaching that your neighbor is also inclusive of even the person who is your enemy. In this parable, Jesus painted a picture of just how radical the Kingdom of God is by flipping upside down (as he often did) our expectations and preconceived ideas and categories and biases. In God’s Kingdom, no one is left out if everyone is a neighbor.

One of my favorite parts of summer camp this past week was seeing about 40 kids who were strangers on the first day of camp learn, organically, how to be neighbors within days. These kids were representative of many different demographics including race, socio-economics, gender, and others. There was a particularly poignant moment on the last night of camp where I saw this neighborliness culminate in a beautiful moment at the altar during worship.

The whole week, the kids had learned about our call to be good stewards of the earth and of all creation, and so it was important to me that we use real bread for communion at the Eucharist service that evening—bread made locally with real wheat and water. So, the camp’s executive director, Stratt Byars, retrieved a large loaf of sourdough bread from the kitchen for us to use. And this loaf, I kid you not, was almost the size of my head. And it was so crusty. I was excited to use it. Just before the prayer to bless the bread and wine, I invited the kids to come up and stand around me and the altar during this very special moment when the bread and wine would become the body and blood of Christ. So, I blessed the bread and wine. Then, when it came time for me to break the bread, I struggled to tear this

massive, crusty loaf of bread in half. It took me a good 10 seconds to tear it in half. I struggled. Seeing my struggles, the kids, in this very solemn moment, started cheering for me. “You got this, Gabriel!”, they said. “You can do it!” Needless to say, I eventually was able to tear the bread. But in that moment, while holding the Body of Christ in my hands, I also got a glimpse of the Kingdom of God. Kids often don’t have the same years-long, engrained tribalism that we adults do. In just a matter of days, these kids formed bonds. I watched them help each other and love on each other and be kind to each other- and all this in spite of anything that, for us adults, might get in the way. Those kids this week, showed me just how radical this idea of seeing everyone as your neighbor really is. They gave me a glimpse of what the Kingdom of God can be and who the Kingdom of God contains. I am grateful for my time at summer camp this week, and I am grateful to have gotten to know a few more of my neighbors in this radical Kingdom of God. May we all learn to see in every person – friend, acquaintance, stranger, and yes, even enemy- our neighbor who Jesus call us to love as ourself. Amen.