

WORSHIP

Sermon | 3.10.2019



What To Do

The Reverend Katherine Kerr

Luke 10: 25-37

In the spring of 2000, the session of this church commissioned noted North Carolina artist Ben Long to paint a fresco that would occupy space in what was meant to be the entrance to what is now the Wood Fellowship Hall. Upon careful consideration, it was decided that this morning's story, the Parable of the Good Samaritan, would be the fresco's subject.

This parable's central question, "who is my neighbor" was seen to be a critical question for our church at the start of a new millennium, situated as we are at the corner of Church and Trade streets in the heart of uptown Charlotte.

If you haven't spent any time with the fresco, I commend it to you. It is, by sheer size, an impressive work of art. Its detail, precision and emotion make it all the more stunning. I must confess, though, that I have taken it for granted far too much in my time here. Too often, my interactions with the fresco have been in passing- catching a glimpse of it as I rushed by to this meeting or that class. Until this week, I never really sat with the fresco.

But as I began reflecting on this morning's passage, I knew it was time to change that. So I spent some time with it, sitting in that quiet space just beyond the stage in the Fellowship Hall, looking at, admiring, and absorbing its beauty. As often happens when we slow down to really appreciate a work of art, be it a



painting or a sculpture, a piece of music or writing, the longer I sat and the more I focused, the more I noticed.

And what I started to see surprised me. The interaction between the beaten man and the Samaritan who stops to help him is obviously the centerpiece of the painting, as it is in the foreground. It's powerful and arresting- the injured man is almost naked, bleeding profusely, and clearly weak. The Samaritan leans over him, well-dressed with a heavily laden donkey next to him. He is carefully wiping the blood from the man's head, clearly getting blood on his own cloth.

But while this is clearly the focal point, it's not the only action happening in the fresco. Not by a long shot. To one side, there are some people walking towards the city, some sheep grazing in the distance and a few children curiously peeking around the corner to see what's going on. And to the other, a group of men is fighting- whether or not they are the robbers who accosted the man earlier isn't clear, but what is clear is that they are up to no good.

As I sat and absorbed the fullness of the painting, it soon became clear that, of all the people in the painting, the only ones actually looking at one another, interacting in any way other than hostility, are the beaten man and the Samaritan. Everyone else is looking away, either on their way somewhere other than there, or fussing and fighting and trying to make a point or win the argument. The only honest human interaction in the whole painting, which takes up an entire wall, is between these two men.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan is doubtless one of the best-known of Jesus' parables. In fact, I would venture a guess that there are a lot of people who use the term "Good Samaritan" who have no idea where it originated or that it is in the Bible at all. The term is a part of our vernacular, having come to be a secular description of anyone who does a good deed, commonly used in news headlines, movies and tv, and it is even the name of a law that protects people from being sued if their attempts to help another person go awry.



And it's easy to see why. Most people, regardless of their religious affiliation or background, can fairly quickly grasp the moral of this story. A man minding his own business, walking from one town to the next, is robbed and brutally beaten by a group of strangers who leave him for dead on the side of the road. Two separate men, each the type to be admired and respected, walk past him without stopping to see if they can help. A third man sees the injured man, goes to his side and tends to his wounds. But even more than that, he places the man on his own donkey and takes him somewhere safe where he can recuperate, offering to pay whatever it costs to make sure the man gets the care that he needs.

It is hard to argue that what the third man, the man from Samaria, the Samaritan, did was good. Hence the title, "the Good Samaritan." This is a story about someone who does the right thing. A good Samaritan does something kind, something helpful, something above and beyond the norm, for someone in distress.

It's a good moral, an important one even. But I want to offer this morning that the moral isn't the whole point of this story.

Let's think for a second about what a moral is. It's a lesson, particularly about right or prudent behavior. The word moral also refers to a person's standards of beliefs and behaviors related to right and wrong. Morals are important, in stories and in human behavior.

But when it comes to discipleship, and the life of faith, it can be easy for us to confuse morals with Jesus, and that can send us down the wrong road.

New Testament scholar Robert Farrar Capon calls the parable of the Good Samaritan a "misnamed parable" for this exact reason. He writes,

Calling [this story] the Good Samaritan inevitably sets up its hearers to take it as a story whose hero offers them a good example for imitation... and is not the following of [Jesus] far more than just a matter of doing kind acts?



...if the world could have been saved by providing good examples to which we could respond with appropriately good works, it would have been saved an hour and twenty minutes after Moses came down from Mount Sinai.

There is no question that a part of Christian discipleship includes moral behavior, doing the right thing. But if that's all we think the life of faith entails, then we are sadly mistaken.

We need only look back to Jesus' introduction to this so-called moral parable to see what Jesus is actually calling us to do. When the lawyer asked Jesus what he needed to do in order to inherit eternal life, Jesus didn't say, "be nice to people," or "perform acts of service every chance you get." No, he asked the lawyer what the law said, and the lawyer gave the response every faithful Jew knew to be correct: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself."

There is no question that there can be acts of service without love. We see proof of this all the time- people do good things for other people for a wide variety of reasons, and some of the reasons are sadly self-serving. One can do something helpful for another person while feeling exactly what I Corinthians 13 tells us love is not: boastful, envious, arrogant, insistent on one's own ways.

There are plenty of examples of acts of service done without love. But there is no denying that there cannot be love without acts of service. It's just not possible. When one opens one's heart to love, one is compelled by that very emotion to do good, not for one's own sake, but for the sake of the other. And this, my friends, is where the challenge comes in for those of us who seek to follow Christ.

Because the real answer to the question of what we need to do to join God's kingdom is much harder for us than just helping someone in need who happens to be right in our path. Even though providing a service for someone else does ask



something of us, loving God and loving others asks a lot more of us than giving a meal, or our coat, or our money to someone. The life of discipleship- the desire to be a Christian, to follow Christ, asks more of us than simply good behavior. It's a challenge, for sure.

That is why this Lent we are taking time on Sunday mornings to look at some of what Jesus said and did in Luke's gospel in the time leading up to his crucifixion. When he, as we tend to say, "set his face towards Jerusalem," our Lord's teaching became very focused on matters of discipleship, on revealing what following him truly means. Taking the time these next six weeks to delve a bit more deeply into these teachings will help us all as we seek to draw closer to Christ.

The season of Lent is an interesting time for Christians. With its roots in the liturgical Roman Catholic and Episcopal traditions, Lent can be confusing to mainline Protestants and those new to Christianity.

I've had what could be called a complicated relationship with Lent since I first encountered it my freshman year in college. I'd grown up in a Presbyterian church where Lent wasn't officially observed, so when in college I started hearing friends talking about what they were giving up that year, I thought I'd give it a try. But I didn't think about easing into this new practice. No, as an eager young college student with a voracious sweet tooth, I thought I'd go big or go home and I decided to give up chocolate.

It wasn't my best idea ever, but I gutted through and resisted almost all of the dorm room candy bars, cafeteria cakes and student union hot chocolate. Easter weekend came around and I went to spend the holiday with a friend and her family in Virginia. Her older brother was home for the weekend too, and since he wasn't much of a Lent observer, he took great joy in trying to get me to cave on my abstinence from chocolate before Easter morning. He wasn't successful, but when I went down to breakfast on Sunday morning, the table was absolutely covered in chocolate candy. My friend and her family were gleeful as they



watched me devour what might have been 40 days' worth of chocolate in one morning.

And I was happy. That is, until the car ride home when my stomach made it clear how unhappy it was. I learned a hard lesson that day. Though I have given things up in years since then, it's not a regular practice for me.

This week, the women of the Thursday Morning Bible Study talked about our experiences with Lent, and it was so interesting. Some try each year to give something up, and some try to take on a new practice. A few don't really observe Lent.

Each one had her reasons for what she does or doesn't do, and none of us felt like we have a real lock on any particular Lenten practice. What struck me though, was that in hearing each person's thoughts and experiences with the season and its practices, we all came to see the validity in a variety of experiences of Lent.

One participant shared something she'd read recently from an article beautifully entitled, "Lent is an Invitation." It reads: "This Lenten season, we invite you to draw closer to our Lord Jesus. Give up those things which keep you away from Jesus. Take on those things that bring you closer to Jesus."

I'm not sure I've heard a more succinct or compelling description of what we ought to be about during Lent.

At its core, this season is about drawing closer to Jesus. As the Samaritan Man approached the man in need when others wouldn't, we are called to approach God and one another with love. We may not know what we're doing, we may feel unprepared, we will sometimes stumble, but we needn't be ashamed. For what God tells us time and time again in scripture is that God loves us, and desires to be loved by us.

This morning, we celebrate two of the most concrete ways we know that to be true. In baptism, we proclaim that God loves us even before we can utter a word,



and in the presentation of Bibles to third graders, we acknowledge that studying, wrestling with, and leaning on God's word is the truest and best way for us to understand how we are to live. One of the greatest gifts of Christian community is the opportunity to practice, together, loving God and loving our neighbor.

For in the end, it is just that simple. And just that challenging. But together we learn and together we can grow into our true identities as beloved disciples of Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God.

