

The Kingdom of God is NEAR: So Disciples are ... Neighbors

A sermon for July 10, 2016

Luke 10:25-37

[Lansdowne UMC](#)

Last week we reflected the grand story of scripture, which finds its climax in Jesus. We focused on the words that Jesus gives to the 70 that he sent out: “The Kingdom of God has come near to you.” And out of the conviction that this message that Jesus preached was actually good news, we are beginning a 4 part sermon series. The point is that if God is in charge of us-- if God is our King, then our lives will take on a shape that reflects the reality that in Christ, God’s kingdom is open for citizenship. Perhaps I should have called the series “The Kingdom of God is near? So what?” Today’s “So What?” is, “so, we are neighbors.”

One of the things that became clear to me, in my dealings with a variety of Christians in various churches, universities, and seminaries, is that in American Christianity today, there are two predominant outlooks on what makes a faithful Christian. Many Christians will identify themselves firmly and without hesitation as having one view or the other.

On the one hand, there is the Christianity of Personal Faith. This brand of Christianity focuses on an acknowledgement of our sin and the availability of forgiveness through Christ. At the heart of the Christianity of Personal Faith is a life-giving relationship with the person of Jesus Christ-- who died for our sins, saving us while we are still sinners, and whose Spirit gives us a new birth, victory over present sin, and the promise of future spiritual growth and salvation. This Christianity of

personal faith particularly values proper scriptural beliefs and spiritual disciplines, like frequent prayer and scripture reading. These beliefs and practices, in turn, open one up to receive a conviction of being saved by Jesus, as well a confidence in a future together with God.

The other outlook might be called Social Justice Christianity. Social Justice Christianity recognizes that there are individuals and groups of individuals who have hard lives and circumstances simply because they were born into a particular group-- a class, a race, a gender, or an ethnic group. They seek to understand and to aid those who are particularly vulnerable to be exploited by those who wish to do evil. Social Justice Christianity therefore values social action, while being skeptical of faith that does not manifest itself in acts of kindness and charity. The faithful social justice Christian, then, is one who devotes themselves to acts of generosity, and who advocates in the public square for those who are poor, needy, oppressed or marginalized by much of society. It is someone who cares not only about attending to the symptoms of poverty and oppression, but to addressing the broader *systems* in society that brought about those circumstances in the first place. Such Christians may frequently point out that those with a different faith or even with no faith at all frequently act in ways that are more faithful than those who label themselves as Christians.

Although Personal Faith Christians and Social Justice Christians might on rare occasions be found to acknowledge truth in each other's convictions, they tend to spend a good amount of their time berating and bashing one another for failing to be faithful. The Personal Faith Christian might question if the Social Justice Christian really loves God. The Social Justice Christian is adamant that love of neighbor is the best

expression of love of God. Meanwhile, the non-Christian world looks on, and has no idea what the fuss is all about. All they see is a divided Christianity that is irrelevant at best, and harmful at worst.

And while Christians of all stripes seek to read the Bible as the word of God, time and time again I see Christians come to the bible hoping to be right, rather than to hear the Word of God. But when we do this, we are not actually encountering an image of Jesus, who is the Word of God made flesh. We are merely encountering ourselves.

So we come to one of the Gospel of Luke's most famous parables, perhaps tied in fame with the Prodigal son. At first glance, even the Personal Faithful Christian must concede that this looks like a text for the Social Justice Christian. A victim lies in the gutter half-dead-- through no fault of his *own*, but because he was a vulnerable person who was exploited by those who wished to do evil. His plight is both physical and economic, as he's been beaten and robbed. Adding insult to injury, he is neglected emotionally and spiritually as, one by one, religious leaders blatantly cross to the other side of the road, as if he's no more than a piece of road-kill threatening to soil the soles of their clean sandals.

We might imagine the Social Justice Christian sneering at the allegedly-religious priest and levite for failing to live out the faith that they profess. We then imagine the cheers as the Samaritan comes on the scene: "Look, he's being more faithful than the religious professionals!" The Social Justice Christian, of course, sees himself in the Samaritan-- singing "Here I come to save the day!" and praying "Thank you God that I'm not like that priest and levite, not like those hypocrite

Christians!” And how ridiculously proud do they get when Jesus says “go and do likewise.” “Ha ha! Told you so!”

The Social Justice Christian’s case is even deepened upon pointing out that the Samaritan bears a great resemblance to Jesus himself. When the Samaritan saw the plight of the man on the side of the road, it says, “he had compassion on him”-- a turn of phrase that is used in other places in Luke’s Gospel to describe not only the reaction of Jesus to someone in trouble, but also the very faithfulness of God. What’s more, the Samaritan’s action bears a great resemblance to the gospel narrative as a whole. In Christ, God reached down and lifted us up, carrying us to a place of healing. Christ provides for our needs in the present, and promises to return to complete the work of salvation in the future. The Samaritan’s actions, and therefore the actions of the Social Justice Christian, are nothing less than a reflection of Jesus Christ.

But wait just a second. There are several problems with this interpretation. And the text is so familiar that we can forget how the story actually works. Samaritans were despised by Jews. They were enemies. They were seen to be an inferior people who twisted the truth of the God of Israel into their own pagan-like worship. Their religion and their race were hated. Is that you, Social Justice Christian?

We expect the outcast character in the story to be the one lying half-dead in the gutter, so that we Social-Justice-Christians with our big hearts and generous hands can wander by and hand out some salvation to this poor sap in the gutter. But in the story, the one who is outcast is the one who brings the aid.

What's more, the Samaritan seems to have everything on hand that he needs in order to save the man lying half-dead in the ditch. How can we "go and do likewise" if some of us don't even have the means to pay our own bills, let alone care for every person that we encounter in trouble as we go about our day?

This brings us to yet another, deeper, problem: Jesus brings things that we cannot bring. And he brings them not only to others, but to us as well. When we assume that we are the Samaritan, we easily fall into the trap of seeing ourselves as the architects of other's salvation. As if we are the ones who get to either hand out salvation generously or keep it for ourselves. I don't have that type of power.

But perhaps the biggest problem of all is that, when we assume that we are the Samaritan, it keeps us from hearing the gospel for ourselves. Indeed Jesus is the Samaritan, but we are not the Samaritan. We are the ones lying on the side of the road. Helpless to save ourselves, we weakly cry out to the one who will hear us. And God's Son, although he was despised and rejected, comes to our side, touches us, raises us up, carries us, heals us, restores us to life. He gives us a place of safety, provides for our needs, and promises to return to complete the salvation.

We're not the Samaritan bringing the salvation; we're the ones longing for the salvation. This story seems like it's a story for the Social Justice Christian, but apart from the Christianity of Personal Faith, it is completely unintelligible.

Apart from Christ we are stuck perishing at the side of the road, unable to save ourselves. The priest comes along, but he cannot give us what we

need. The levite can do no better. We would have happily received salvation from these respectable, proper religious types. But what we get instead is the face of the one whom we have despised and rejected. Can you bear the thought? Your only salvation comes from one whom you have made an enemy. Our only salvation comes from one with the race and the ethnicity and the class of those we have despised.

The telling of the story is prompted by the question of a legal expert, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” That doesn’t sound particularly like a person who recognizes that he’s desperately lost and perishing without the mercy of God. And so the answer Jesus ultimately gives is that he can’t look to the religious leadership-- he must receive salvation from the one he despises: Jesus himself.

Until we can look into the eyes of those who are different from us-- yes even those we consider enemies-- and see the eyes of our savior, we are missing the point of the parable of the Good Samaritan. At this point, the Social Justice Christian may rightly return to the conversation and begin their reflection on how to proceed with acts of compassion and justice. Yes we must go into the world to love our neighbor as ourselves. No we cannot place any ethnic, racial, or other convenient boundary on that love. Yes, the obligation goes even to those whom we have considered enemies and who consider us enemies. But when we serve others, we are not the answer to their prayers-- they are the answer to ours. We need them, and in them we must see the face of our savior. To do otherwise is to reject the form in the God has chosen to be revealed to the world. And as long as we see ourselves as fundamentally superior to the people to whom we give aid, we can never actually *serve* them-- we can never actually love our neighbor as ourselves.

You do believe me that we're the one in the gutter, right? One only has to consider the events of the last week to have to admit this. Obviously I wasn't directly a part of any of the shootings that took place, and yet how often do I take granted that police officers are only a phone call away? How often do I forget that every call, no matter how seemingly benign, is that officer placing themselves in danger for the sake of others? How often do I pray for these men and women who don't get called to share in my good news, but who get called to share in the worst moments in my life. How often do I appreciate how ridiculously hard it is to operate in an environment where the stakes are so high, and the bad outcomes so public?

Then again how often do I take for granted that, unlike some of my well-educated friends, I've never been pulled over for driving in my own community at night? That I've never even known anyone that was shot, even though 50% of deaths among young black men are homicides. How many times have I *unintentionally* been more saddened over the news of the death of a white child than over the death of a black one-- as if a black life mattered less-- like it was more ok to lose? When I sit before the judgment seat of Christ, as we all will, and Christ asks me what I've done to remedy the injustices that are indeed present in our society and our world, what will I say? Right now I will have to say, "Lord, I've done pathetically little."

We are the ones languishing at the side of the road until Jesus saves us and heals us and enables to walk on the right path again. But having been rescued, the service that we do as Christians doesn't come from some sense of duty or guilt. It certainly doesn't come from a sense of

fear. Instead it comes from a deep *response* of love to one who reached out, reached down, and reached you and me.

The situation between Social Justice Christians and Personal Faith Christians should be instructive for us. The best Methodists have held these two views together in tension-- like John Wesley himself, the founder of the Methodist movement. He preached that Christianity was fundamentally a religion of the heart, but he also worked tirelessly to care for the needy-- founding schools, medical dispensaries, orphanages, the first home for the elderly. He even advocated for the abolition of slavery decades before it had popular support.

Yes, our personal relationship with Jesus is the most important relationship in the world; and yes, if you do not find yourself reaching out in love to others, you need to question whether you believe at all. The gospel is about how people are saved out of the gutter by one who was despised and rejected, and therefore it entails loving the ones who have been despised and rejected.

Neither the Social Justice Christian nor the Personal Faith Christian tells the whole story all the time. We need each other to emphasize what the other too often neglects. Let's get beyond the labels. The Kingdom of God has come near to you. So what? So let's learn how to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Amen.