

“The Wounded Healer”

Valley Presbyterian Church – February 21, 2021

First Sunday of Lent

Psalm 15

Rev. John Wahl

Luke 10:25-42

The title of today’s sermon – “The Wounded Healer” – comes from a book of the same name by Henri Nouwen, who spent much of his life working with physically and developmentally disabled persons in the L’Arche Community. *In our woundedness*, Nouwen says, *we can become a source of life for others.*

You may not know the name “Mack” McIngvale – but if you live anywhere around Houston, Texas – you know “Mattress Mack” from his flamboyant television commercials. But over the last week, they now also know Mack as a Good Samaritan for having opened the doors of his large furniture stores and invited people who have no heat, no running water, and no food to come and stay there. Anyone is welcome to use the beds and sofas in the showroom, to sit and watch a movie on the big screen TV or eat a meal on a dining room set. Since Tuesday, about 350 people have been staying there, with hundreds more coming in to warm up and get coffee, use the portable bathroom facilities or eat from one of the food trucks that Mack has arranged to feed them. “The main thing,” Mack says, “is to get people out of the cold.”¹

Most of us know some modern story about a Good Samaritan; there are hospitals, clinics, and shelters named after this character in Jesus’ famous parable about what it means to show compassion toward our neighbors; to rescue people who are in need; to give generously and selflessly without regard to potential cost. Many states have laws named for the Good Samaritan, making it possible for bystanders to help people in need without being placed at legal risk when they do. What is not to like about helping the stranger and being charitable toward others?

In our modern context, the Samaritan comes to represent the Christian who has learned to care for others and break free of prejudice; whereas the priest and the Levite proclaim self-interest over love of neighbor and focus on ritual purity over compassion. But those are not the messages that a first-century Jewish audience would have heard.

In order to fully understand the impact of Jesus using a Samaritan as the answer to the legal expert’s questions: “What shall I do to inherit eternal life... And who is my neighbor?” we need to look, in the progression of Luke’s gospel narrative, both

¹ From *The Seattle Times*, Feb. 18

backwards – to the sending out of the seventy disciples earlier in chapter 10 – and forwards – to the conclusion of this chapter and the oft-misunderstood story of Martha and Mary. We need to see that Jesus, here identified as “Teacher,” answers these questions in reverse order.

We are not told much about the man traveling down to Jericho who is robbed and beaten, stripped of his clothes and left for dead by the side of the road. He was utterly helpless, with no identification or money, no cell phone or roadside assistance. To the others who happen upon him, the man could not be identified by what he wore or how he spoke. This image would have been relatable to the seventy disciples who had recently been sent by Jesus to go out as lambs in the midst of wolves; to voluntarily give up their purses and extra clothes, to go without their cell phones and credit cards. While their journeys ended up being a success, surely they understood the dangers of traveling in the ancient world.

Most of us were taught that the priest and the Levite pass by the man in the ditch because they are afraid of being contaminated by a corpse and violating ritual purity laws. But there is nothing impure about touching a person who is, as Luke describes the man, “wounded,” or half dead. Nor is there any sin in burying a corpse. The Law required that both man attend to the one in the ditch, whether dead or alive, for one is to “love their neighbor” and “love the stranger” regardless of who, or how, they were. Their responsibility was to save a life; they failed.

Martin Luther King, Jr. offers maybe the best explanation for the refusal of the priest and the Levite to come to aid to the man in the ditch. “I’m going to tell you what my imagination tells me,” King once preached. “It’s possible these men were afraid...And so the first question that the priest (and) the Levite asked was, ‘If I stop and help this man, what will happen to me?’ But the Samaritan came by, and he reversed the question: ‘If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?’”²

The victim in the parable of the Samaritan was stripped, beaten, and left for dead. Does that sound familiar? If we think of Jesus as that person, are we not forced to conclude that we are the Samaritan; we are called not only to serve the neighbors we know and love, but to also identify with the last, the lost, the least, and the lifeless. From a Jewish perspective, a Samaritan would be despised and rejected and yet – in this story – he is identified as the one who heals and will come again. Again, does this sound familiar? If we think of Jesus as the Good and merciful Samaritan, then we are the victims in the ditch; good as dead. Only when we realize how vulnerable we are can we experience the healing and saving compassion of Christ.

Whatever the motives of the priest and the Levite, King is correct. They, like the lawyer, were thinking only about themselves, not about the man in the ditch. The

² Recorded by Amy Jill-Levine, “Go and Do Likewise”

lawyer asked Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus reframes the question. The issue is not the “who” but the “what,” not the identity but the action. When asked by Jesus which of the three was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers, the lawyer cannot even say the hated name “Samaritan;” he can only say “The one who showed him mercy.”

The Samaritan does what God does. The divine is manifested only through our actions. Therefore, Jesus responds to the lawyer’s observation not with a question, and not with a parable, but with an imperative: “Go,” he says, “and do likewise.”

Like the Samaritan traveling down the road, Martha offers hospitality to Jesus and his disciples when they enter her home. Like the legal expert who questioned Jesus, she seems to be concerned about doing the right things. And as he challenged the perspective of the lawyer in his parable, Jesus challenges Martha’s perspective here.³

Many who hear this story may cheer for Mary and her inversion of traditional gender roles. Many may also empathize with Martha’s seeming resentment of her sister for leaving her to do all the work. The issue with Martha is not about serving, but rather that she is worried and distracted; she is being pulled in different directions. Martha’s worries and distractions leave no room for the most important aspect of hospitality: gracious attention to the guest.

In a culture that offers us hectic schedules and the relentless pursuit of productivity, we are tempted to measure our worth by how busy we are, by how much we accomplish, or by how well we meet others’ expectations. Many people identify with Martha: feeling pulled in different directions, feeling worried and distracted by many things. Much of our busyness and distraction stems from the noblest of intentions – we want to provide for our families, to give our children every available opportunity, to serve our neighbors, to serve God. Where would our churches be without “Marthas;” those faithful folks who perform the tasks of hospitality and service that are so vital to making the church a welcoming and functioning community?

The danger of this story comes in pitting sister against sister, Martha against Mary, the ministry of hospitality against “sitting at Jesus’ feet.” It is possible that this description of Mary is not literal; that it meant she was one of Jesus’ disciples; one of the seventy that had been sent out. It is possible that she is not even there in the house; that Martha’s worries and distractions are not about Mary sitting there, seemingly doing nothing; but that she is on the road, doing the work of ministry. Maybe her absence, and not her laziness, is what has Martha agitated.⁴

³ Audrey West from *WorkingPreacher.com*

⁴ Amy Courts, “Let Mary Be Mary”

The real danger to this story is trying to define for ourselves – or for others – what is the better part: pitting one expression of discipleship, service, and faith against the other. This is not a story about whether service or learning, the giving or receiving of hospitality is better; because both are hallmarks of following Jesus. This is not a story of comparison and competition; this is instead about revealing what is possible; what God wants to be possible.

Certainly, as Luke tells this story, Jesus wants us to know that Martha and Mary are his valued and beloved disciples; that what they do matters. Just as a Samaritan can be the model of compassionate and neighborly love, so also can these two women: one, a homeowner who opens her doors to welcome, house, and feed Jesus and his disciples who have no place to lay their heads; the other, who – doing what was considered “men’s work,” by literally and figuratively sitting to learn at the feet of Jesus – is serving out in the field where the harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few. Martha and Mary cannot be about who can do better; or who is better.⁵

Luke’s story is left unfinished. We are not told what happens next: whether Mary and Martha are reunited or reconciled; whether the guests were able to enjoy the meal that Martha had prepared; whether, after the preparations were made, Martha was finally able to sit and give her full attention to Jesus.

But we do know that Jesus invites all of us who are worried or distracted by many things to sit and rest in his presence, to hear his words of comfort and grace, to know that we are loved and valued children of God; not because of what we have done, but by what God has done for us. “Come to me,” Jesus says, “all you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” There is only need of one thing: to pay attention to our guest. For, as it turns out, the guest is also our host: the one who has abundant gifts to give.

There is not one way to serve; to be a disciple of Jesus. There is not a man’s way or a woman’s way. There is not one for neighbors and another for strangers. “Mattress Mack” is not cooking meals or making phone calls to check on seniors or out repairing downed power lines; he has opened the doors to his furniture store so that the people of Houston can come in out of the freezing cold and have somewhere to sit or lie down. Sometimes we need to listen; sometimes we need to act.

“O Lord, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill?” – we heard in today’s Psalm. Who belongs? The answer, something the legal expert couldn’t bring himself to even say, is anyone; every single child of God. Loving and serving them – in whatever particular way that we are called – is indeed the better part. Amen.

⁵ Karoline Lewis, “No Comparison”