

The Samaritan

Amos 7:7-17; Luke 10:25-37

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I suppose a Sunday in Advent is as good a time as any, and better than most, to squirm beneath the standard for doing right, set for the moment uncomfortably beside the standard for doing grace. Setting matters of such consequence side by side on a day when we eagerly long for and anticipate the fulfillment of the promise that the Kingdom of God shall come on earth as it is in heaven may signal that they ought always to be set side by side.

Wonder if that *is* it? To our way of thinking, must the standard for doing right always be set beside the standard for doing grace? "I have seen a vision of a plumb line set in your midst," said the prophet to the people of God. A plumb line is nothing more than a string with a weight on the end which a builder holds beside a wall to be the standard for straight up and down. "I have seen a vision of a plumb line set in your midst," said the prophet to the people of God. "Against that plumb line God will judge what you do that is right and what you do that is wrong; what you do that is faithful; and what you do that is faithless; what you do that is true; and what you do that is a lie."

Wonder if the congress has any such sense of a plumb line in their midst, any sense of being judged for doing the right thing? But that was for the Fourth of July holiday. This is the church's Lord's day, and it's the first Sunday in Advent. We're waiting on the Kingdom of God. Today the question is put to the church. "Against that plumb line," said the prophet, "there is no margin for error.... I repeat, no margin for error." Other places the prophet talks of forgiveness, but not here, not in the context of the plumb line.

Then, more than half a millennium later, "Who is my neighbor?" the lawyer asked Jesus; whereupon Jesus told the lawyer the story of the Good Samaritan, and no one doesn't know the story of the Good Samaritan, only the Bible doesn't call him *good*. The church added the adjective, and what the Samaritan did has become the standard for doing grace.

I do wonder if the standard for doing right and the standard for doing grace should always be seen side by side: do right, do faithfulness, do truth all on one side; and just beside: do grace...*extravagantly*. Maybe that *is* the way it should always be. According to the way I remember hearing the episode, it happened about mid-afternoon of an uncommonly hot day rather like the uncommonly hot days we had around here last July and August. Heat rose off the supermarket parking lot like the fumes of a perdition and sent what few diehard shoppers there were slow-treading to their cars like tired mules maneuvering the rows of a wasted corn field.

A rather worn-down African American woman of the age to be a grandmother made her way with a loaded shopping cart to an old ratty looking blue Buick with one scavenged yellow fender barely attached. The head liner was sagging. One child was in the shopping cart. Another was clinging to her skirt. She must have been their grandmother. The only colorful spot in the wasteland was a young European Ameri-

can woman fashionably dressed in tennis togs. A small bag of groceries was tucked neatly under her arm. With her free hand, she held a child of six or seven in tow. Just as the tennis-tog woman reached her Suburban station wagon and the worn-down grandmother reached her ratty Buick just beside it, there erupted a few yards away a brutal shouting match of a sure and certain domestic nature. A hard-living white couple was coming out of the supermarket cursing each other and shouting at the tops of their voices. My friend who told the tale and a half dozen or so other people were on hand to witness the sad drama.

When the fashionable woman with groceries in hand and child in tow saw and heard what was happening, she quickly unlocked the Suburban, got her child and herself inside, and locked the doors behind them ... click. The grandmother likewise hurried her charges into the safety of the Buick ... click.

At that precise moment, the shouting match turned physically violent. The man struck the woman full across the face and sent her sprawling on the hot pavement. With skin scraped from several places about her head, hands, and knees and a trickle of blood emerging from the corner of her mouth, the poor woman got up and ran in a limping gait toward the Suburban. Her attacker was in lumbering and heated pursuit. The badly beaten woman frantically knocked on the window of the Suburban pleading for a place of safety. With a shake of her head and a despairing lift of her hands, the tennis-tog woman denied admission, and the engine of the Suburban roared to life.

Just then the door of the Buick swung open. The worn-down grandmother emerged, now come to full life and energy. With her black hand, she grabbed the beaten woman, pushed her into the driver's side of the Buick, and slammed the door. She then stood squarely in front of the closed door between the attacker and his victim with a hand firmly planted on each of her considerable hips, whereupon the attacker put both hands in his pockets, lowered his head, and began to examine his shoelaces. My friend and several other bystanders gathered about to assure there would be no further acts of violence until the police arrived.

Meanwhile, the Suburban circled the parking lot once and returned to the scene. The person inside lowered the window and said to the assembled crowd, "I was afraid of what might happen to my daughter." "Nothing so harmful as the lesson you have taught her," said my idealistic friend in disgust¹ as she echoed my own hard thoughts on the subject. And yet...and yet, we do understand, don't we? I've heard one of the first lessons taught to rookie police officers is to be extremely cautious when they have to get involved in a domestic altercation. In all honesty and candor, if it had been our daughter and our grandson in that parking lot, I would have been relieved to see our daughter exercise such caution. The child's safety really was the matter of priority concern. It may make us all sad and even angry beyond measure at the state of affairs that put her in such a circumstance, but no one, not one can blame her.

Just so, in the story of the Good Samaritan, many experts now agree, no one in the hearing of Jesus when he told the story and no one who first read Luke's account of the story was surprised in the least that the priest and the Levite passed by on the other side, sad and disappointed perhaps and maybe even angry, but neither shocked nor surprised.² You remember the story of the Good Samaritan, I'm sure. A lawyer asked Jesus how to obtain eternal life. Though there is no evidence of hostility, it was a trick question, so Jesus turned the table and asked the lawyer what the law says on the subject. The lawyer answered with the well-known joining of two laws: love

God and love neighbor. On that, Jesus and the lawyer agreed, only Jesus added the caveat that the lawyer must *do* the law and not just *know* the law.

The lawyer then pushed the matter by asking Jesus to define neighbor, whereupon Jesus told the now famous story of the Good Samaritan, only, as I said earlier, we call him *good* while Jesus only called him *a Samaritan*. It was enough to make the point unmistakable. The story goes like this: on his way from Jerusalem to Jericho, a man, presumably a Jew, was beaten, robbed, and left for dead. At intervals, a priest and a Levite, both religious leaders, passed by on the other side. As I said, no matter how much preaching to the contrary you have heard and I have preached, neither Jesus' listeners nor Luke's readers would have been shocked by their reaction, disappointed perhaps but not shocked. The shocking surprise, the punch of the parable, was yet to come. As the story continues, a Samaritan not only stopped to help, but the Samaritan went to extravagant lengths in helping: he bound the wounds, provided transportation, provided lodging, and promised to return, all at an extravagant cost. Little wonder the church calls him *good*.

It's hard for us to grasp the enmity between first-century Jews and first-century Samaritans, just like it's hard for us to grasp the enmity that still exists all over the world, including the Middle East. The Samaritans were half-breeds. They made a mongrel race of the seed of Abraham; but worse, they profaned the faith of Abraham and corrupted the law of Moses. This is more than the stuff of a Hatfield helping a McCoy in western North Carolina or of a Jet helping a Shark in West Side Story or of a Capulet helping a Montague in *Romeo and Juliet*. More than that and much more real, this is the real life stuff of a Jew helping a Palestinian in Israel or a Serb helping a Croat in Eastern Europe or a Tutsi helping a Hutu in Central Africa or a Sunni helping a Shia in Iraq; or a member of a black gang helping a member of an Asian gang in downtown L.A. And what shall we say of the Yellow Dog Democrats and Tea Party Republicans in Washington or of a red-neck flying an outsize Confederate flag from his outsized pickup stopping to help a white-haired old man change a tire on his Prius with a peace symbol on the rear window. Or what shall we say of the resentment and suspicion that exist between liberal and conservative Christians?

This is only a partial list. There's a lot of suspicion, fear, and hate wafting about our world like sultry and sinister breezes, but even from the partial list, you get the picture; and, once you get over the shock of it all, you soon begin to get the even bigger picture ... the picture of some great and eternal truth, the picture that it is only acts of unlikely and extravagant grace that have a chance at bringing healing to our most gaping and bloody wounds.

Devilish thing for me to do on a single Sunday, don't you agree, especially on a Sunday in Advent: taking the plumb line that sets the standard of right and wrong, faith and faithless, truth and lie, and setting it beside the standard for the grace we *must do* if there is to be healing.

In a day when so little is known of our Bible stories, it is difficult to say any one of them is too well known. This one, however, gets very close to crossing that line. There are laws named for the Good Samaritan which protect people who stop to render aid from lawsuits. There is a well-known charity named for the Samaritan's purse. There are awards given out in schools that are likewise named for the Samaritan, not to mention the countless hospitals that bear his name. The danger in such familiarity is that the real point of the parable might be missed. The story, for example, is not

a prescription for how we should carry out acts of charity. As a matter of fact, the leaders of most congregations I know strongly recommend that you not give cash to needy people who approach you on the street or in the church parking lot asking for assistance. Of course, there are instances when to do so is the only right thing, and when confronted with such situations, we must each one make the decision of what to do; but the truth is, in almost all instances, the church, with its own resources and in cooperation with other churches and agencies has in place ways we can provide more healing expressions of grace than giving a few dollars in the parking lot. Nor is this mostly a story about hypocrisy among church leaders. As serious and rampant as that problem no doubt is, and even though that is a subtext in the parable, this is not the best text to address that sad subject, lest in doing so, the real punch of the parable be obscured. The text is mostly about extravagant grace coming from unlikely quarters and the healing such unlikely and extravagant grace brings.

The late Fred Craddock, one of the best known and most beloved teachers of preaching ever, has said that you can't really understand this parable until you have identified with the man in the ditch. I think he's onto something important. Many years ago when I was a very young preacher, there was a controversy festering in the larger church. At the time I was serving a middle size congregation in a small town in the panhandle of Florida. For quite some time presbytery meetings on the subject had been tense. Finally on the day of division, trumped up charges and counter charges were leveled, harsh words were exchanged, bitterness was palpable, and by day's end, the vote was taken. Division was real. Sixteen congregations left our denomination. It was by far the saddest and most bitter day of my ministry. I continue to believe it was an unnecessary division based largely on lies and counter lies.

As it happened, not many weeks after that, a couple having dinner at our home got a frantic call from their babysitter saying their infant was in distress. I drove them home at breakneck speed. From there I drove them with equal speed to our little hospital emergency room and from there, at the doctor's strong urging, I drove them, again at equal speed, to a regional medical center in Pensacola more than a hundred miles away. It was long before EMS became nearly as sophisticated as it is today.

Finally, at about 3:00 in the morning, with the baby stabilized and grandparents were on the scene, I took my leave. Only then, walking through the hospital lobby, knowing we had come into the parking lot on little more than prayer and gas fumes, I realized that in the rush to leave, I had left home without my wallet. I had neither cash nor credit card with which to buy gasoline. When I turned to find a seat from which to ponder my predicament, there, coming down the corridor as if on cue, was one of my most ardent adversaries from the ill-fated presbytery meeting. He was in the hospital at such an unlikely hour to call on a desperately ill member of his congregation.

You must know that our respective reasonably sophisticated vocabularies are all that kept the names we had called each other just a few days before from being profane if not vulgar. In my view, he and his ilk had profaned the deepest truth I hold, and he thought the same of me and my ilk. Each of us was certain the other had corrupted the faith of our beloved church.

We greeted each other and exchanged a few halfhearted and tired niceties. Finally, I mustered enough courage to tell him my plight. Without the least hesitation, he loaned me twenty dollars for gasoline. I thanked him and turned to go out into the

night. As I was starting the car, I looked and saw him running across the parking lot. “Wait,” he said. “Take my Visa card just in case you have car trouble or want to stop and get something to eat.” Healing took place there in the parking lot in Pensacola. The church was not reunited. My opinion of his position and his opinion of mine did not change, but healing took place.

Just think of it: alongside the measure of right behavior, faithfulness, and truth telling, we have set, at least for today, the measure of just such healing grace as happened in the hospital parking lot. It is the standard of what we must do. There is no alternative. It is the grace we *must* practice. We have no choice; that is, if we’re to be faithful to the gospel we profess, we have no choice.

You didn’t forget Jesus added that caveat, did you? Just as we must not only know the law, we must do it; we must not only know the Samaritan’s grace, but we must do it. By doing such grace, there will be healing.

As to all others out there who on this day hate each other, we cannot force our faith upon them. But we can demonstrate it. No, that’s wrong: we *must* demonstrate it. It is in the demonstration of such radical grace that the hate-torn world has hope for healing, and we dare to await with eager anticipation the sure coming of God’s kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

Notes

1. This is an adaptation of a story I heard at Morning Prayers some considerable time ago at the Mount Pleasant Church. Shirley Hendrix is the person who told the story. Whether she observed the episode or reported having heard of it, I cannot remember. I do remember that the editorial comment was hers.
2. Fred Craddock, *Luke* from the Interpretation Series (John Knox, 1990), 149 f; Cousar *et al*, *Tests for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV -- Year C* (Westminster/John Knox, 1994), 426 f; Robert C. Tannehill, *Luke* from Abingdon New Testament Commentaries (Abingdon, 1996), 181 f.