

Sermon: Decrease the Distance
Text: Luke 10:25-37
Date: October 29, 2017
Context: WWPC
Reformation Sunday
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

Before we hear our text for today, allow me a few words of introduction on this special day, this historic day.

This Tuesday marks the moment, five hundred years ago to the day, that an Augustinian monk and theologian named Martin Luther nailed his famous Nine-Five Theses to the door of the All Saints Church in Wittenberg, Germany, also known as the Castle Church.

There are so many things one might say about what that moment meant, so many things one might say about the consequences of that defiant gesture, that it's nearly impossible to narrow the range of possibilities down to a manageable amount to cover in just this one Sunday, this Reformation Sunday.

For the truth is that the world changed after that day. It was not Martin Luther's intention to launch a global reformation that would fracture the Catholic church and lay the ground work for the rise of countless Protestant denominations all across the world.

It was just his way of saying: *Enough! Something is wrong and I'm not going to stay silent about it any longer.*

But despite Martin Luther's modest intentions, the effect of his defiant gesture was so vast, so far reaching, it is almost impossible to calculate or quantify it.

In time, everything related to the church changed. Theology changed, including the Protestant church's understanding of salvation and the sacraments.

Our relationship to and understanding of the Bible changed, including who could read it, and in what language.

Our understanding of the clergy changed, including who could be in it. (Hint: the priesthood now consists of all believers, including everyone here today, and ordained ministers, thank the Good Lord, could finally marry.)

Sacred music changed. Church musicians began to write hymns and congregations began to sing them. Church art and architecture changed, ornate cathedrals giving way to plainer looking sanctuaries. (Not my favorite change, I'll confess.)

And more than a few things not related to the church changed: Politics and international relations changed, and the advent of the Protestant work ethic gave rise to advanced industrial economies. Which is to say, history itself changed.

Honestly, it would take many weeks to cover all of those changes, and still more weeks to trace the full history of how Luther's gesture gave rise to the Lutheran church in Germany, and how the ripple effects of this tectonic shift extended out to other parts of Europe.

How it inspired other thinkers and theologians: John Calvin and Huldrych Zwingli in Switzerland and France, and John Knox in Scotland -- to cite the big three -- and how their influence in turn gave rise to so-called Reformed churches all over the world, including, the Presbyterian Church in its many incarnations here in the United States.

So it is right to pause on this day, this Reformation Sunday, to recognize, commemorate and celebrate this historic anniversary.

But because the consequences of Luther's single gesture are so vast, so far-reaching, I'm going to go in the other direction.

I'm going to narrow our focus today, and distill the Reformation down to just one critical lesson. I don't know if it's the most important take away from what happened in Wittenberg, Germany on October 31, 1517, but it's one we would all do well to remember.

And it's this: with that one small gesture, Martin Luther proved, beyond any argument, that it is literally possible to reform the church and, indeed, to change the world itself, with nothing more than a hammer and a nail.

So, holding on to that thought, I'm now going to invite us to turn our attention to our text for today, to the story of the so-called Good Samaritan. The story is so famous, so familiar, we're going to present it a little differently today.

Ironically, given how familiar this story is, we're going to read it twice.

It begins with a bit of dialogue between Jesus and a lawyer, but once the actual story begins, there are two main characters.

The first, as you'll recall, is presumably a local resident, that is, a Jewish man who gets robbed by roadside bandits.

The second is, of course, the Samaritan--not just the man who cares for the wounded traveler, but a foreigner. And not in a good way.

He is passing through a land where he is not welcome. Where people of his race and religion are viewed with suspicion and even contempt, including by the man in the ditch. (Remember that, it's important.)

I offer this brief context about these characters because on the first reading, I want you to imagine that you are the man who falls into the hands of the roadside bandits. Close your eyes if it helps you to imagine your way into that world.

So now, as the Reformers would have put it, I invite you to listen attentively to God's written word...

Luke 10:25-37:

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus.

“Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

“What is written in the law? What do you read there?”

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.”

“You have given the right answer; do this and you will live.”

But wanting to justify herself, the lawyer asked Jesus,

“And who is my neighbor?”

“A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.

“So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity.

“He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him.

“The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’

“Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?”

“The one who showed him mercy.”

“Go and do likewise.”

* * *

So what was that like for you? How did it feel, first to be lying there half dead beside the road?

Did it evoke any strong feelings, or any memories for you?

Maybe -- and I certainly hope this is true -- maybe you've never been assaulted and robbed by roadside bandits, but maybe there was another time when you were brought low, when it felt like you were wounded, or abandoned and left for dead.

Maybe an unkind colleague blindsided you with a betrayal, with a sucker punch to your heart, as it were, one that left you bleeding on the inside. Or maybe a mean-spirited relative or romantic partner shook you down, or just shook you, and left you feeling dazed and frightened.

And what was it like when the religious figures passed you by, when the priest and the Levite ignored you? Did you notice? Did that surprise you? Did their indifference to your plight also hurt you?

And, finally, what was it like to be tended to and cared for by a man whose race and religion offend you, a man you might ordinarily hold in contempt.

Now we're going to read the story again. This time put yourself in the place of the Samaritan.

[See text above.]

What was it like to give aid and compassion to a local resident? That is, to a man who quite likely looks down on you? A man who might actually feel contempt for you?

What was it like to bandage his wounds, to put him on your animal? What was it like to be so generous, to pay for his stay in the inn?

What was it like to know he was going to heal and get better, and to know that you were largely responsible for that?

Remember those thoughts. Hold on to those feelings...

I noted earlier that this is the story of the "so-called" Good Samaritan. I said that because the adjective "good" famously does not appear in the story itself. Jesus uses the story to answer a question from a lawyer, and it's not just any question. It's a doozy:

Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life? So this story is literally a matter of eternal significance.

Which is to say, the stakes in this story could not be higher, or more important. And yet Jesus does not describe this foreign traveler, this reviled Samaritan, this compassionate and generous care-giver, as good.

So the question is, why do we?

Karoline Lewis an associate professor of preaching at, yes, Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN, asks it this way:

Was the Samaritan good because he was moved with pity? Was the Samaritan good because he went to the beaten man and bandaged his wounds?

Was the Samaritan good because before bandaging the left-for-dead man's injuries he poured oil and wine on them?

Was the Samaritan good because he put the [injured man] on his very own animal? Was the Samaritan good because he brought him to an inn and took care of him?

Was the Samaritan good because the next day he took out two denarii, equivalent of two paydays, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him?" Was the Samaritan good because he said, "when I get back I will repay you whatever more you spend." That is, was the Samaritan good because he made sure that both the man would be well and even that the man might prosper?

Yes, I think, is the answer to all those questions. The Samaritan was good for all of those reasons.

But then Ms. Lewis drives her main point home with a rhetorical flourish:

What if the Samaritan was good because he simply made the choice to come near the almost dead guy in the ditch? To approach him? To decrease the distance between him and the man clearly in need of help?¹

There is a word for that gesture, that act of decreasing the distance. We call it compassion.

Maybe the answer our question is that simple and that profound, the Samaritan was good because he showed compassion.

¹ These extended quotes, together with Ms. Lewis's full commentary on this passage, can be found here: <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4685>

And maybe that's what this story is asking of all of us: to decrease the distance between ourselves and our neighbors in need. And to show compassion even across, especially across, lines of cultural, religious and ethnic differences.

Today is not just a special day on the larger church calendar. It is also the mid-point in our own stewardship campaign. As most of you know, our theme this year is *What does the Lord require of you?*

If we take this story to heart, it would seem the answer to that question is simple: to show compassion, to decrease the distance between ourselves and our neighbors in need.

We have a number of our ministry partners here with us today who serve those neighbors and who also help make it possible for us to serve them, too. They'll be waiting for us in the narthex after our congregational meeting, so I hope you'll take some time to get to know them a bit better.

But here's the real twist in this brief story, and frankly I find this rather astonishing. The benefits of showing compassion to our neighbors in need--to the wounded and the hungry, to the sick and the vulnerable, do not accrue just to them, though that is certainly true.

Arguably the biggest benefit of all accrues to the do-gooders, to the ones who minister to them.

For Martin Luther, the key to salvation, the key to inheriting eternal life, lay through justification by grace, through faith alone in the atoning death of Jesus Christ.

Jesus himself had a much simpler theory: *Do this and you will live*, he says to the lawyer. If that sounds like works righteousness, if that somehow offends your Protestant sensibilities, take it up with Jesus. He said it, not me. (You know, assuming you're ever reunited with him!)

Closing the distance and showing compassion to our neighbors may sound easy. It was for the Good Samaritan. The injured man was right there, lying in plain sight. He just had to walk a few steps and start wrapping his wounds with bandages.

But of course it's not always that easy. Indeed, it's often much easier to keep one's distance. I did so just the other day.

I passed a lady on my drive home whose car was broken down right in the middle of a busy four lane road. *This is a job for the police*, I said to myself, taking in the flow traffic all around her--and justifying my decision not to pull over and help push her and her car to safety.

Sometimes keeping our distance seems smart. Sometimes it's just plain safe.

But it's not the way to inherit eternal life. And the message of this story could hardly be more urgent than it is today.

Because on this Reformation Sunday, it must be said that something is terribly wrong in our country. The entire body politic is wounded. We can barely talk to one another other across our lines of difference, and when we often leave one another feeling more even more hurt and wounded than before we began.

And something is also terribly wrong in the church. Nearly an entire branch of the Christian family tree has thrown their support behind a man who appears to feel contempt for the poor, and disdain for people of a different race than he is. Or at least that's the impression he consistently conveys.

Five hundred years ago Martin Luther had had enough. So he nailed his Ninety-five Theses to that church door in Wittenburg and not only reformed the church, he changed the world.

It's time Christians of all stripes, Catholics and Protestants alike, picked up our own tools -- our love for God and, yes, our love for the truth, and a willingness to speak that truth, out loud and in public.

But also our love and compassion for our neighbors in need; our unalloyed belief in a bright hopeful future; our persistent joy and our resolute faith, both of which we practice sometimes despite the evidence -- it's time we picked up all of these tools and joined with the priesthood of all believers in the work of reforming Christ's church and rebuilding our country.

Amen