

“Hopeful Provocations”

Sermon on Sunday, July 14, 2019

Based on Luke 10: 25-37

From time to time our faith is put to the test by totally unpredictable events. Someone asks for your help and you have to decide. Everything you learned about loving your neighbor, everything that you theoretically learned, is tested in a moment that begs your response. That’s the gist of the famous parable about the Good Samaritan who shows us what situational Christianity looks like. In a difficult and tense situation, he does the right thing and helps the injured man on the side of the road, even though it was dangerous and the man was not in his camp, not part of his tribe. The religious professionals, who presumably were in the victim’s camp, don’t score so well. Between Jericho and Jerusalem their faith is given a major stress test. They don’t pass it because they decide not to be there. The question is: would we pass the test?

Jericho and Jerusalem are far away from us, almost six thousand miles through the air. And the story that Jesus tells a lawyer who asked a simple question (who’s my neighbor?) is about 2,000 years in the back mirror; so we are safe, no? The old stories are the best. They are nice enough to not embarrass us. They are far enough removed from us to not indict us. Except, I have a feeling that we’re not really that far away from Jerusalem and Damascus, spiritually speaking. We share some of the epic tensions that defined Jesus’ days. At a time when the divide in our own country has become so entrenched that even close friends avoid sensitive topics, when pastors and rabbis carefully filter what they say from their pulpits, worrying how it may be interpreted in the culture wars of our time, this story about the Good Samaritan is a hopeful provocation. And I mean that. Provocations are often destructive and mean and make matters worse, but this one is a hopeful provocation. Let me tell you why.

In Jesus’ days the soap opera between Jews and Samaritans was entrenched. They two sides practiced their faith in separate temples; they read different versions of the Torah; they avoided social contact with each other whenever possible; they lived in separate parts of Abraham’s land. And though *we’re* inclined to love the Good Samaritan, Jesus's choice to make him the hero of his story was a bold move, a hopeful provocation, a spiritual challenge issued to expand people’s imagination. “Can you imagine a Good Samaritan?” Jesus asked.

Fast forward to 2019 and it is not difficult at all to draw parallels between this ancient rivalry and the cultural divides that tear at the seams of American society and many other societies as well. Let me attempt to draw up a few contemporary analogies for this story. Let’s say an Israeli Jewish man is robbed, and a Good Hamas member saves his life. Or a liberal Democrat is robbed, and a Good Conservative Republican saves her life. A white supremacist is held up at gun-point, and a Good Black Teenager bails him out. A transgender woman is robbed, and a Good anti-LGBTQ activist saves her life. An atheist is severely injured, and a Good Christian fundamentalist brings him to a hospital just in the nick time. Without even once mentioning the name of Jesus!!! Those are all hopeful provocations.

We tend to look at this story as an example of how people we may disagree with, people we don’t like, may turn out to be better than we think. And that’s an ongoing lesson that this parable teaches. But, there is another side to the story as well that we don’t often see. And that is, if you are the person in the ditch, the victim of some crime, the person who is harmed, and someone reaches out to you whom you don’t exactly like, that can be just as difficult to accept. In fact, do

this as a spiritual exercise... If you hate the guts of a particular group or brand of people, imagine that one of those folks would bail you out of a truly terrible situation. Of course you tell me, "I don't have any enemies; I don't hate anyone's guts; I'm good." I imagine that's what 90 percent of the Jews at Jesus' times said and then, when a Samaritan came along, for some reason they looked the other way. So, we may have to dig deeper into our souls and confront any pre-judgment, also called "prejudice" we may have and embrace this hopeful provocation. Could there be a good somebody you didn't expect to be good?

It is usually stories and experiences, not formal teachings, that change people's perceptions. We may argue, "This is just a story that Jesus made up," which is true! I would like to suggest that similar stories abound in real life, they just have to be identified and told. Do you remember the close friendship between the late Justice Antonin Scalia and Ruth Bader-Ginsburg, two head-strong individuals from opposite political universes? Scalia was a principled conservative; Bader-Ginsburg is a celebrated liberal. They went to the opera together; they enjoyed each other's company; they were friends. Guess what? They even inspired an opera of their own. *Scalia/Ginsburg* was launched at a special presentation at the Supreme Court of the United States in 2013 before receiving its world premiere production in 2015 at renowned conductor Lorin Maazel's Castleton Festival. It was written by Derrick Wang with the telling subtitle, "We are different. We are one." The Los Angeles Times wrote afterwards, "Could we please make it a constitutional requirement that no one can be sworn into office in the White House or Congress without having first seen Scalia/Ginsburg?"

It is stories (or operas) like that which change people's perceptions and imaginations. We need more imagination, instead of lazily attributing labels to people from the so-called other side. That's the hopeful provocation Jesus issues in today's gospel. I wonder whether we couldn't all come up with one story of a person that truly surprised us in a good way, a person that changed our perception of things even in small ways. I wonder, if we asked everybody in our congregation to think of one such story and put it together in a collection of thought-provoking, life-altering experiences, what a treasure that would be. Because the stories are here, among us and within us, trust me on that. We may just have to dig them out and tell them.

When I lost my brown leather jacket (yes, I once wore leather jackets), when I lost it by my own stupid fault in 1998, which was the year when I introduced Julia to my home country, and when I lost my wallet and passport which were in the jacket, and we had to go to the police and file a report and we had to contact the embassy to get new identification, and Julia finally realized what she was getting into with me... we also had an interesting experience. A week and a half later a man called my parents where we stayed and said he had my jacket with everything in it, passport, wallet and all. He came for Kaffee and Kuchen at my mom's house. A smiling, American-born black man married to a German woman, a traveling businessman. Apparently it took him a few days to do the right thing, but he did it and returned the jacket he had found in a restroom in southern Germany. I still picture him sitting with us at the table, talking, smiling, laughing. It was a hopeful moment. And what is also hopeful for us is this part of the story: situational Christianity can be difficult and we may fail. Doing the right thing at the spur of the moment is difficult. But then sometimes, God gives us a little bit of extra time to think about it and we can still do the right thing. Like this man. Between Jericho and Jerusalem our faith is put to the test. Or between Philadelphia and Washington. Or between North Wales and Ambler. Let us practice what we believe. We are different. But let us be one. It's the best hopeful provocation for our time! **Amen.**