**I WISH I COULD BE…**

**(Luke 10:25-37)**

Holy God, may my words and our thoughts be so blessed by your Holy Spirit that your truth and your love may be known among us. Amen.

This is a terribly familiar story. We call it the story of the Good Samaritan. Samaritans weren't supposed to be good - they were supposed to be avoided the way Senator Joseph McCarthy wanted to avoid communists. Priests and Levites - they were supposed to be good, they were church people, but here they're not so good. So this is another of Jesus' reversal stories - he turns our usual world upside down. It's the story of the Good Samaritan.

So familiar is this story that we have on our books in many states what we call Good Samaritan laws. They are meant to protect from liability suits people who were only trying to be Good Samaritans, but something went awry and some unintended damage was done. It tells us how complicated this matter of being a Good Samaritan has become in our litigious society. You can get sued when you were just trying to be a Good Samaritan.

The person in distress in this story of Jesus was probably a Jew - that seems to be assumed. And so the fact that it was a Samaritan who stopped to help a Jew in distress, while a priest and a Levite passed him by - well, that’s what this story is all about.

And it may be terribly familiar, but it's not old stuff. It's an incisive story - and where it has its impact on us depends, in part, on where we locate ourselves in the story, with whom we identify ourselves. Parables are meant to be played with in this way.

+ So, for example, we may think of ourselves as the priest or the Levite...and so feel guilty for all the ways we pass people up in their need.

+ Or we may think of ourselves as the poor person who fell among thieves...and so feel sorry for ourselves and sad for how unsafe our life and our possessions are.

+ Or we may think of ourselves as the Good Samaritan...and so feel affirmed for the ways in which we do seek to help people in distress, even going out of our way sometimes to do so. One of the beautiful things this story can do to us today is to affirm and to confirm that wonderful impulse that is in us, to help our neighbor.

+ We may even think of ourselves (though I doubt that any of us will) as one of the robbers...and so think of all the people we put in distress - for example, if we are a bad landlord or an insensitive manager, or boss, of people.

+ What many of us do when we hear stories like this is think of ourselves as the little birdie that sees all this taking place and says, My, my, but isn't very much involved in the action, only a spectator of all that goes on. Jesus' stories are meant to draw us in - he's not talking about other people, he's talking about you and me and how we behave. The point is not to talk about what other people do and say My, my, but to think about what *we* do and perhaps say Jesu, Jesu, Lord, help me!

Something we may not have noticed is the way Jesus turns the lawyer's question around. The lawyer asks, Who is my neighbor? The question Jesus answers is, To whom may I be neighbor? A neighbor isn't something you just have, a neighbor is something you can be - that's the point. So the question is, How’s it going for us, this business of being neighbor? There are, someone has noted, three kinds of people in the world - those who beat people up, those who pass people up, and those who help people up. We all would like to think of ourselves as being in that third class, but maybe we should be careful. That requires active help, not just good wishes.

A woman was selling tickets once for a benefit concert to raise money for shelters for the homeless.(These are some of the distressed people of our time, the homeless.) One fellow said to her, I can't get to the concert, but I'll be with you in spirit. And instead of thanking him for that, she said: You’ll be with us in spirit? Good, where would you like your spirit to sit - main floor or balcony? She was calling him to accountability for his good wishes and showing him that sympathy without action is empty...or as St. James says, Faith without works is dead (James 2:14-17 - look it up!).

What this familiar story of the Good Samaritan is, I think, is a huge, plate-glass window through which we can clearly see how we are to regard others if Jesus be our boss, our Lord, our Savior. If you ever wonder who a certain person is to you, what he or she means to you or deserves from you, here is your answer: that person is your neighbor, even if you are a Samaritan and that person hates you, even if you are a Jew and that person is an Arab, even if you are a Democrat and that person is a Republican, even if you are pretty well off and that person is pretty poor, even if you are...(the list of distinctions that can be drawn, you see, is endless). What that person deserves from you is your respect, your neighborliness, and your compassion - that is, your thoughtful and generous and active help. And here’s a biting point to remember: the love that we show to a neighbor in that way is an exact yardstick of our love for God. We love God only as much as we love our neighbor. (1 John 4:20-21 - look it up!)

So who is the neighbor that needs that from you right now? It may be someone in your home...or at your job...or in the community…or at your southern border…or on the other side of the world. Charity begins at home, but it isn't supposed to end there. The real problem for most of us is not how much we do to help our own but what we do to help those who don't belong, don’t belong to our family, our clan, our nation, our race. The neighbor these days may be the immigrant…or the refugee. There's a whole lot of neighbors out there! And if we can't help them all, that's no excuse to sit back, take our ease, eat, drink, and be merry, as if that's what life is all about. Being a neighbor every chance you get - that's what life is about, according to Jesus.

One of the beautiful angles on this story is to see it as a picture not of how we are to treat others but of how God has treated us, what Jesus has done for us. Here we are not the Good Samaritan - we are rather the poor person who got ambushed and left half dead, ambushed by our sin, our greed, our selfishness. And Jesus is the one who came by, climbed down off his high horse, got down to where we are in our distress, risked his life, indeed, sacrificed his life to do everything possible to help us in our need. The oil and the wine, then, can be the oil by which we are anointed in holy baptism and on our deathbed as belonging to him eternally, and the wine can be the wine by which we are refreshed over and over again in the holy communion. And the innkeeper is God, to whom Jesus says about you and me: Take care of this precious person, I will pay you whatever it takes. Jesus is the Good Samaritan, Jesus is neighbor to you and me. If you ever wonder who you are or get to feeling worthless, here's your answer: you are worth everything Jesus has got!

Here's another interesting angle on this story. Being a neighbor isn't just our duty - it is our privilege and our joy. A minister once was taking some gifts around to needy people, one of whom was a widow who lived in a small shack with her two sons. When the minister drove up in her shiny new car, it caught the attention of the older boy. And when she returned to her car, the minister saw the boy admiring it, and so she explained how she got it: her brother was a doctor, she said, and he had given her the car for her birthday. Some birthday gift! When he heard that, the boy looked up and said, Gee, I wish I… And you probably think he said: I wish I had a brother like that? No, he said: Gee, I wish I could be a brother like that. Jesus tells us this story, and we say: Gee, I wish I could be a neighbor like that. And Jesus says: You can be! Go and do likewise! Find your life and your joy and your treasure not in getting rich or making yourself comfortable - find it in being a neighbor like that. It is not too hard for you. You can do it. (Deuteronomy 30:11ff - First Lesson of Day)

One final angle on this story. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho apparently was notorious for crime, and a great German Lutheran preacher of a generation ago, Helmut Thielicke, once said: one of the things we are called to do in our day is to clean up the roads and make them safe. Preventive action we call it - let's act before the crime, and then we won't have so many neighbors in distress. Social action we call it - doing what we can to make the world safe: to make toys safe, make travel safe, make work safe, make breathing the air and drinking the water safe. Let’s do what we can to make the road from Jerusalem to Jericho safe for all travelers.

Dr. Karl Menninger, the famous Kansas doctor, was asked once what a person should do who feels a nervous breakdown coming on. He said: "...lock up your home, go across the railroad tracks, find someone in need, and do something for them.” Dr. Menninger was right: Good Samaritans bring health and happiness not only to others but to themselves as well…because that's what life is about, being a neighbor. And we *can* do it! *By Jesus we can!*

Pastor Phil Schroeder

Pentecost 5, Proper 10 — 14 July 2019

Nativity Lutheran Church - Weeki Wachee, FL