

Have Mercy

Luke 10:25-37

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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October 31, 2021/23rd Sunday after Pentecost

As I set to work Friday morning on a sermon I wasn't planning on preaching, I thought, "Well, if you have to come up with a last-minute sermon, you could certainly do worse than working with this passage!"

It's one of my favourites. I suspect this is true for many of us.

It's no surprise why Orlando had planned on preaching from this text. You could hardly find a more succinct summary for the vision and history of MCC than this story.

Over the course of the last century, MCC has been committed to tending to people struggling in the ditches of the world, regardless of their colour or creed, in imitation of Jesus' teaching in parables like this one.

Indeed, it is stories like this one and the role they play in our theological imaginations that probably accounts for the deep commitment to MCC in our congregation.

I sometimes speak to people at MCC who tell me that when they visit Anabaptist congregations across Alberta, they sometimes have to make a case for supporting MCC's work. They don't feel that way about our church. "We know we're preaching to the choir at Lethbridge Mennonite Church," they say, or some version thereof.

I'm not going to talk about MCC today. But I do want to talk about this story that in many ways symbolizes so much of what we understand Christian faith to be about, and what we aspire to, however often we fall short.

Jesus is approached by an "expert in the law" with a big question. The *biggest* question, you might say. *What must I do to inherit eternal life?*

"What do you think?" Jesus asks him. "How do you read the law? You're the 'expert,' after all!"

The scholar dutifully recites the twin commands to love God and neighbour that form the heart of the Jewish law.

“Sounds good,” Jesus says. “Go do that.”

But *he wanted to justify himself*, Luke says.

(How often we want to justify ourselves when we ask questions of Jesus!)

So, he says, “and who, exactly, is my neighbour?”

We know the rest of the story. Jesus doesn’t answer his question. He doesn’t tell give him a nice tidy list of all the people who fit into the box of “people I must love to be a good person and inherit eternal life.”

Rather, he tells him a story with a hated Samaritan showing a bunch of good religious Jews what love of neighbour looks like in action.

He tells him a story that turns an enemy into an example.

The “expert” in the law came to Jesus looking to justify himself, to secure his own eternal status, and to draw boundaries around the group of people that he had to concern himself with.

And Jesus shows him exactly how far. But not in the way he expected. Instead of drawing the boundaries around all the people that had to be squeezed into the “neighbours I have to love” box, Jesus showed him what neighbour love looked like.

And he showed him what it looked like by casting a guy from about the most undesirable category of people that the expert in the law could think of in the starring role.

A Samaritan. A half-breed. An unclean idolater. A dog.

(These are harsh-sounding words, but probably not as harsh as some that might have been uttered in the first century.)

And it is this Samaritan who shows the religious expert how far love reaches. He tends to a wounded man on the side of the road—a man who was ignored by a priest and a Levite, these pillars of Jewish piety in the first century.

It's interesting what the Samaritan in Jesus' story doesn't do, doesn't say.

He doesn't encounter the man on the side of the road and inquire about the circumstances that led to him being there.

He doesn't say, "Well, what on earth were you doing on such a dangerous road in the first place?! How could you be so thoughtless?"

He doesn't say, "You know, you people are always getting yourselves in such bad situations!"

He doesn't probe and interrogate the wounded man, demanding that he prove that his suffering is innocent, that he had no role in the circumstances he has arrived in, or anything like that.

He sees a man bleeding on the side of the road, and he tends to his wounds. And he goes beyond this, ensuring that the man will be cared for at his own expense even after he has gone.

That's what a neighbour looks like, Jesus says.

As I've mentioned in a previous sermon, Naomi and I are making our way through the popular TV portrayal of Jesus' life called *The Chosen*.

The show imaginatively fills in a lot of the gaps in the story. If you're looking for chapter and verse rigid faithfulness to the four written gospels, *The Chosen* may not be for you.

But I like how the show re-imagines the story of the Good Samaritan. It provided a new window into the story, at least for me.

In *The Chosen's* interpretation of the story, Jesus and his disciples are in the Samaritan village of Sychar. Jesus has had his conversation with the woman at the well and is teaching in the village.

The disciples are uneasy about being in Samaria so long. They want to get this Messiah show moving. And whatever they may or may not know about it, they're pretty confident that it doesn't involve Samaria or Samaritans.

Jesus, as always, has other ideas. He sets James and John to work tending some anonymous field. James and John aren't sure what the point of this exercise is, but they're pretty sure it means they're his favourites.

Meanwhile, Jesus and the rest of the disciples go to town to buy food. Jesus has hinted at a “dinner party” later and they’re full of anticipation.

And so, at the end of a day of tilling and gathering and planning, they all trudge off with Jesus toward some unknown destination where they’ll have dinner.

They show up at the house of a man named Melech. Melech is a poor, crippled farmer. He is also a Samaritan and is confused as to why these Jewish guests have shown up. He’s heard of Jesus but has no money to give to him or his cause. He certainly has no food to offer them for a dinner party.

“Don’t worry about that,” Jesus says. “We brought food.”

The disciples grudgingly realize that they will be dining with a Samaritan and his family that night. Worse still, James and John find out that it is Melech’s field that they have been working all day.

Over the course of the meal, Jesus draws out Melech’s story. Melech’s poverty led him to make a desperate decision.

He had hidden out with a friend on the road from Jericho to Jerusalem until a Jewish traveler came by. They attacked him, robbed him, took everything he owned, and left him for dead.

In the aftermath, Melech fell off his horse and broke his leg. He had to crawl to the nearest town to get help. He had no idea if the man he robbed lived or died. He came home injured and worse off than before was wracked with guilt over what he had done.

Melech finishes his story, sighs and says to Jesus, *Now you know what you’ve done. The kind of man you have helped. I could be a murderer.*

Jesus looks at him and simply says, “He didn’t die. Somebody came along and helped him.” He doesn’t say who helped. Just that “somebody” did.

At this Melech breaks down in tears of relief mixed with guilt. *Why me? Why did you come out here?*

Jesus responds, “The shepherd leaves the 99 to search for the one who went astray.”

Jesus forgives Melech. He embraces him and calls him his friend. The next morning, Melech wakes up to find that his broken leg is healed.

It's an interesting spin on a familiar story. Why do I tell it? It's a cool story but it's not the one the gospel of Luke tells.

I like the way *The Chosen* tells this story for a few reasons. First, it kind of levels the ground between all human beings.

At face value, this story would seem to reinforce existing stereotypes. The Samaritan is the villain and the Jew the suffering righteous victim.

And yet, Jesus has brought his Jewish disciples out to share a meal with an impoverished Samaritan farmer. He has put James and John (unknowingly) to work in an enemy's field.

He has listened to the Samaritan's story, offered forgiveness and friendship. And he has done all of this with his Jewish disciples watching.

He has enacted the story of the Good Samaritan in front of their eyes.

He has crossed boundaries of race and religion. He has refused to look the other way in the face of human suffering. He has loved an enemy and in so doing has turned him into a friend.

Jesus locates everyone in this story—Jews and Samaritans—in the same categories of “sinners in need of mercy” and “human beings with a duty to look across boundaries to see need.”

This is a good word, it seems to me, in a time where we increasingly obsess over and essentialize our identity markers, be they of race, gender, sexual orientation, or whatever.

We are all, every last one of us, sinners in need of mercy.

Second, it combines a bunch of themes of Jesus' life, teaching and character.

We recognize the story of the Good Samaritan, certainly, but there are also hints of Jesus' teaching about the lost sheep and how the Good Shepherd seeks out the lost. We also see an enactment of Jesus' stubborn insistence of prioritizing hospitality with the wrong sorts of people. We see Jesus, the Great Physician who heals our infirmities. We get a foretaste of this great banquet that Jesus is always talking about.

Even though this story isn't in the gospels in precisely this way, it's not at all hard for us to imagine that it could be. This is the Jesus we know and love. This is the Jesus with whom we have cast our lot.

Sometimes it takes a new spin on an old story to help us see the character of Jesus with fresh eyes.

Third, and most simply and importantly, it is a story that is *saturated* with mercy. And this is where I want us to end this morning. With mercy.

At the end of our reading this morning, Jesus asks the Pharisee, “Which of these three [the priest, the Levite, and the Samaritan] do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”

The expert in the law responds, “The one who had mercy.” And Jesus simply says, “Go and do likewise.” Go and show mercy.

What Jesus says to the expert in the law, he says to us, too. *Go and show mercy.*

Our world is very short on mercy these days, it seems to me.

We live in angry and polarized times where people love to call each other out for sins, real or imagined.

Our enemies today, it seems to me, aren’t primarily racial or even religious but ideological.

Racism and religious intolerance still exist, obviously, but when I look around it doesn’t seem to me that this is the main way that we divide ourselves anymore.

These days, we sort ourselves into the categories of “clean” and “unclean,” “righteous” and “unrighteous” according to our political views.

For us, categories like “liberal” or “progressive” and “conservative” or “traditional” take the place of “Jew” and “Samaritan.” And our hatreds and suspicions run just as deep.

In this context, what would it mean for the church of Jesus Christ to cultivate a determined disposition of mercy? What would it look like for mercy to be our default setting in our interactions with those who don’t think like us?

What would it look like to show mercy to the anti-vaxxer? Or to the person with the wrong views on climate change? Or race or sexuality or gender identity?

What would it look like for our first instinct toward the person whose stupid opinions make our blood boil to be one of mercy? What would it look like for us to see a human being in need underneath the ideas and behaviours that so bother us?

The other day, Naomi and I were sitting at the kitchen table, just talking about a wide variety of people in our various orbits, about the challenges they were going through, the things they were facing.

At the end of our conversation, we just kind of sat there and were struck by a simple truth. So many people are going through hard things. All the time.

I think we would do well to remember this. It might help us to be more merciful.

That conservative acquaintance of yours who has all the wrong ideas about issues you care deeply about? They might be struggling to cope with the pace of change in the modern world. Their kid might be struggling with thoughts of suicide, and they have no idea how to help them. They need your mercy.

That super-woke co-worker that drives you nuts with their endless progressive political commentary? Maybe they're just desperately searching for a story to give their lives meaning and belonging. Maybe their marriage is falling apart. They need your mercy.

Pick your example. Chances are good that whoever drives you nuts with all their dumb ideas about the world likely has some hard things going on under the surface that you can't see and may never know about.

And even if they're not—even if their life is magically (and implausibly) going perfectly. They still need mercy. We *all* need mercy.

Remember, “showing mercy” is the answer Jesus gives to the expert in the law’s question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Mercy is not some optional extra for the super-committed Christians. It’s not something we ought to get around to someday once Jesus has had some time to refine our character.

It’s life and death. *Eternal* life, if we take Jesus seriously. Jesus seems to care more that we show mercy than that we get our ideas sorted out. We should ponder this more deeply than we often do.

In the ninth chapter of Matthew's gospel, Jesus gives the Pharisees an assignment. Quoting the prophet Hosea, he says, "Go and learn what this means: I desire mercy and not sacrifice."

It's an assignment the Pharisees struggled mightily with. It's an assignment that we still struggle with.

Sacrifice comes easy to us. We are only too eager to sacrifice others on the altars of our ideological purity.

Mercy is the harder road. But it is mercy, I suspect, that will save our souls. In the receiving and, perhaps just as importantly, in the giving.

Lately, I've been praying using the Book of Common Prayer. Each day, towards the end of the prayers, I pray these words:

Let us commend the world, for which Christ suffered, to the mercy and protection of God this day.

I love beginning my days commending the world to God's mercy. In the end, our mercy emerges out of the mercy that God has shown and continues to show us in Christ.

So have mercy. This is the path to eternal life.

Amen.

