

7/12/20

Sermon: For My Neighbor Crystal

Luke 10: 25-37

Rev. Laura Fitzpatrick-Nager

On my way back from a protest last Sunday in Stonington, I noticed my gas tank was on empty. Pulling into the Mobil station just off exit 90 in Mystic, I saw the hotel. The Quality Inn, there it was just across the street. I shivered in the heat as I remembered what had happened there to a Black woman named Crystal Caldwell just a few days before.

Ms. Caldwell, an employee of the Quality Inn, was the victim of a racially motivated assault that left her hospitalized.

It has become a too familiar story of racism. A white couple at the hotel was unhappy with the lack of hot water and thus, they broke her ribs, hurled racial slurs and left her with a concussion and worse. A warrant is still out for the arrest of the perpetrators. Hate crime charges have finally been added as of Friday to the assault charges.

The crowd at the Stonington Black Lives Matter gathered for Crystal in the hot sun and all victims of racialized violence and hate. We heard a myriad of powerful voices of color, among them our guest reader today, Councilman Kevin Booker, Jr., who facilitated the event.

Those of us who were white were asked to stand up and commit to doing something further beyond simply attendance at this rally. Would we just be passersby or follow through on concrete actions of mercy and justice ?

In Connecticut alone, over the past several weeks there have been at least seven racist incidents. And all over our country since the death of George Floyd, the names and numbers of people of color attacked and killed remain staggering. Racial violence begets more violence.

Returning to the familiar stories of our faith can ground us in these heavy days. Today's parable asks to consider not only who is my neighbor but at a deeper level, who am I in relation to them? What the 20th Century philosopher Martin Buber called the *I-Thou* dynamic, the relationship of two equal whole selves as opposed to the *I-It* mode of racism.

Who is my neighbor today and how do I/ how do we respond to the broken bodies in our midst?

Within the biblical story from Luke, Jesus frames a response to the neighbor question. He's been asked a couple of questions by someone in the crowd and in Socratic fashion, Jesus raises some questions of his own and "tells a story slant" in order to make his point.

The lawyer knows the first two commandments quite well as any student of Torah would. This prayer, known as the shema, would have been part of his daily recitation. From the book of Deuteronomy in the Old Testament, the prayer contains the first two commandments, the love commands...about who a person of faith gives their heart too.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind and strength and love your neighbor as yourself. (Deut 6.4)

In the second part of the text, Jesus uses the power of story which cuts to the heart of neighborhood matters. A violent robbery leaves a person beaten, half-dead on the side of the road. Two separate people *pass by* the wounded, crossing the street to avoid him. Their avoidance is worth noting and as deliberate as the Samaritan's moves were compassionate. The contrast is glaring. The folks from the community you might expect to stop, passed him by.

Were the priest and Levite too busy, were they afraid or did they think the mugged person wasn't worth getting involved with? We don't know of course, but we can wonder why they chose to disengage. Bystanders have their reasons.

A third traveler, a Samaritan, an outsider from Samaria in the north, sees the beaten man, too, but he not only sees, but goes to the man's aid, touches him, bandages wounds, pours on healing balms, carrying him to safety and rest. The embodied nature of the narrative turns on these stunning acts of compassion.

The Samaritan's outpouring made him a true neighbor (even though at the surface, back in the 1st Century, Samaritans and Jews were sworn enemies.) In bringing the wounded to an inn and staying overnight, the Samaritan enlists the help of the innkeeper and thus, the circle of care becomes a partnership of extending mercy.

The innkeeper, given silver and a blank check for more, becomes a trusted partner. I get the feeling he's all in.

“Take care of him”

Take good care....

The cycle of violence in this scene is broken for now and it is a time for healing in community. The future of the wounded person and in turn, those who help him, may be changed for the better.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., preached about the Good Samaritan passage at various points in his ministry. In 1955, at Montgomery's Dexter Avenue Baptist Church (King pastored there from

1954 to 1960, and organized the [Montgomery Bus Boycott](#) from his basement office), King preached that “In the midst of such staggering and appalling conditions we cannot afford to “pass by on the other side.” Like the good Samaritan we must always stand ready to descend to the depth of human need. The person who fails to look with compassion upon the thousands of individuals left wounded by life's many roadsides is not only unethical, but ungodly...”

King continues, “But there is another aspect of social responsibility which is just as compelling. It seeks to tear down unjust conditions and build anew instead of patching things up. It seeks to clear the Jericho road of its robbers as well as caring for the victims of robbery.”

Here we are in 2020. The road is in need of some serious clearing and rebuilding.

In this pandemic, we keep witnessing the generous outpouring of help and compassion for the ill, their families, medical personnel and for essential workers doing the caring.

We’re witnessing extraordinary levels of participation in ongoing protests and growing activism calling for systemic change that are often multiracial and multigenerational.

At the same time, what can’t be denied is the reality of racism seen in the disproportionate numbers of patients of color afflicted by COVID. As well as the workers of color helping to care for them.

The questions keep returning. Who have I passed by? Who am I neighboring to in these times – or not?

In spite of the news, this isn’t about politics. There’s nothing political about ministering to broken bodies, carrying them to safety and seeking to rebuild the road in a better, more humane and equitable way.

This call to *compassion in action* is about responding as Jesus would have us do with all our hearts, all our minds, and strength and loving the neighbor as we go.

It's actually *just mercy*, writes author Bryan Stevenson, author of the founder of the Equal Justice Initiative.

“There is a strength, a power even, in understanding brokenness, because embracing our brokenness creates a need and desire for mercy, and perhaps a corresponding need to show mercy. When you experience mercy, you learn things that are hard to learn otherwise. You see things you can't otherwise see; you hear things you can't otherwise hear. You begin to recognize the humanity that resides in each of us.” — Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*

The good news of the gospel imperative compels us to participate in this healing work before us. We are compelled not to just pass - not to disengage at this juncture in history.

Sometime it may be me in that ditch.

It may be you.

It may be our neighbors of color, like Crystal or George, whose very lives have called out to us to join in the chant, *Black Lives Matter*.

As a largely white community of faith, we are being called into deeper levels of compassion and justice-centered care, to wrestle in substantive ways with the history of racism. *Let us become a parable of mercy in action.*

The journalist, author and radio talk show host, Krista Tippett asked a powerful question in a recent interview. I think it's a central faith question, too. "*How do we live redemptively, reparatively, rather than destructively?*"

These and other questions are among those we'll explore in our Book discussion circles starting next week. You are all invited to read with us a series of three books by summer's end. Next Thursday evening, July 16th, we'll meet on our front lawn at 7 pm and discuss *White Fragility* by Robin Di Angelo, followed by *How to be An AntiRacist* by Ibram X Kendi on August 4th and then finally in late August, *Tears that Cannot Stop* by Michael Eric Dyson. All of those titles are on our church webpage.

Please take a risk and come to one or all three. If you've only read half of the book, or haven't started it...come anyway! We have an opportunity here to read, learn and make ourselves vulnerable together. It's not easy. We'll see how we might find answers to those questions raised, listen with hospitality to one another's stories and imagine together: *What kind of neighbors shall we be?*

In Nelson Mandela's memoir, *Long Walk to Freedom*, he writes:

"No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin or her background or their religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite. "

For Crystal's sake, let us "Go" forward.

Amen.