

Gleaning In The Fields Of Light

Crossing The Road Toward Jesus
(An Idea For Our Community Garden)

By Ken Woodley

(Note: This is the sermon I preached last Sunday. I'm using it as a "Gleaning" because it contains an idea for our community garden and I want everyone in the congregation, for transparency and togetherness, to have this information).

The story of the Good Samaritan is one of the most beloved parables in the New Testament. A classic short-story with a marvelous, poignant and stereotype-shattering lesson.

In a single paragraph, Jesus probes and then reveals what it means to love one's neighbor as oneself, and, explicitly shows us who our neighbors are: everyone. No exceptions.

The journey down from Jerusalem to Jericho is not an easy one. The 18-mile journey descends 3,200 feet. A man walking down that road is set upon by robbers, stripped and beaten and left for dead after being robbed.

Luckily for this unfortunate soul, a priest comes down the road. Perfect. Surely the priest will provide the loving and compassionate response the law requires. He is, after all, a priest. But the priest doesn't go near the robbery victim. He keeps on walking. Probably doesn't even look back.

Fortunately, however, a Levite comes around the bend in the road a little later. A Levite is what's known as a temple functionary, and so-named because he is from the priestly tribe of Levi.

Surely he knows the law about loving one's neighbor as oneself just as well as the priest. Of course he does and that's why he takes compassion on the robbery victim and.....Oh, wait a minute, the Levite walks on by just as quickly as the priest did.

If a priest and a Levite won't help the man, who will?

Certainly not that Samaritan coming down the road now. Samaritans are regarded as rank outsiders. Bad eggs. Unworthy and looked down upon by the holier-than-thou priests and Levites.

But, what's this? The Samaritan takes pity upon the poor man. He crosses the road, bandages the man's wounds after pouring oil and wine upon them, which were deemed to have medicinal value.

The Samaritan puts the man on his own animal and takes him to an inn, stays there and cares for him, and then provides the innkeeper with enough money to continue caring for the battered man until the Samaritan returns, promising to reimburse the innkeeper for any additional expense.

“Okay,” Jesus asks the lawyer when the story is finished, “which one of those three guys was a neighbor to the man who’d been set upon by thieves and left for dead?”

The lawyer, who cannot even manage to use the word Samaritan when answering the question, simply replies “The one who showed him mercy.”

“Go,” Jesus tells him, “and do likewise.”

Easier said, in the real world, than done, of course.

Some years ago, when we were having a series of ministers preach to us before Father John arrived, one of them presented us with a compelling twist on the parable of the Good Samaritan. In his version, we were the human being lying beaten, stripped and half-dead on the other side of the road. And Jesus was the Good Samaritan.

That telling of the parable struck a deep chord for me because I have experienced Jesus in just that sort of way. Many of us have.

It also encouraged me to see the story from different points of view.

So.....Suppose it were Jesus?

Jesus there, lying stripped and beaten and half-dead on the other side of the road.

What if we were walking down that same road and came around a bend in that road from Jerusalem to Jericho and saw him lying there?

Or suppose we were walking or driving down a road in Appomattox on our way to Lynchburg?

We don’t know it’s Jesus.

We just know it’s a man

Stripped, naked.

Beaten and apparently dead.

A long-haired man, scraggly and bearded.

A homeless person, undoubtedly.

Unemployed, apparently.

Perhaps dangerous.

A criminal, maybe.

Or mentally unbalanced.

Would we be the Good Samaritan, despised by most of polite and powerful society, and cross the road, caring for his wounds with expensive

medicine and then driving him to a place of refuge and safety, paying for his care from our own wallet or pocketbook?

I cannot stand here and offer an assurance that I would choose to do what Jesus wanted me to. Fear and self-interest can keep us on our own side of the road and we're pretty good at making what we regard as a strong case for not getting involved in something that could be pretty messy.

Few of us will ever walk or drive down a road and see a fellow human being beaten, stripped and lying half-dead on the other side of the road. That literal circumstance is one we're not likely to encounter.

But, in a way, we actually do encounter Jesus in just that devastated condition every day.

Not Jesus, literally.

But what Jesus hoped and prayed for. The kind of world that Jesus gave his life for.

The Kingdom of heaven, the Kingdom of God, takes a beating every day.

The Kingdom of heaven is lying stripped and half-dead on the sides of roads all over the world, all across the United States of America.

Headlines, soundbites and tweets declare this tragic truth every day.

The world seems hardly more civilized now than when Jesus left the shores of Galilee and began his journey toward Jerusalem and a hill known as Golgotha.

There, on that place of a skull, the homeless and unemployed Jesus—he was employed only by God and without a salary—would be stripped half naked and executed on a cross as a criminal along that hilltop road..

But he died believing the kingdom of heaven was near.

Drew his last breath knowing the kingdom of heaven *is* near.

Today, the Holy Spirit, along with Jesus' words in the New Testament, continue to preach that Good News.

The kingdom of heaven truly is near. As close or as far away as the world allows it to be.

As close or as far away as we permit it.

The one prayer Jesus taught us—which we sing here together every Sunday before communion—contains the words “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

If only that would happen more often and in more places.

And it would happen, and it does, when we hear the Holy Spirit of God calling out to us through those words, when we feel the Holy Spirit of God praying these words in our hearts: “My kingdom will come, and my will will

be done, on earth as it is in heaven, when you cross the road where it's waiting for you. The kingdom of heaven is that close. Right across the figurative and literal streets.”

The road we humans must always cross first is the one within our own heart. Only after we cross that road can we cross the literal roads we travel down during our lifetime.

Sometimes, all it takes is a little encouragement, someone showing us the way, being an example. That's why Jesus told parables—they show the way, they provide examples of how we human beings can cross the roads deep down inside our hearts, cross those roads toward one another, toward the kingdom of heaven lying half-naked, beaten and robbed.

Sometimes we find ourselves given the chance to offer that encouragement, a moment when we can choose to be an example and point the way.

St. Anne's does offer such examples. St. Anne's does point the way. Which means that we are embracing actions that cross the road and bring the kingdom of heaven just that much nearer.

But that doesn't mean our work is done.

This nation's deepest wound is racial and has been since the first slave ships arrived to Virginia's shores a few hours east of here. So, what can we do to help America's healing journey?

Why don't we invite one of our neighbors just down the road, New Jerusalem Baptist Church or the Jesus Center—both with predominately African American congregations—to join our community garden next spring? There's plenty of space available.

Let's sow seeds, tend our plants and collect our harvest together. And let the whole community see us doing so. We'll make a new sign for our garden and our garden will become a new sign, itself. Let's be one more healing ripple across the deep waters of racism that began flooding our nation in 1619.

The Civil War effectively ended right over there but America has struggled to cross the road to where true liberty and justice for all still lies beaten, robbed, half-naked and near death. The self-evident truth that all people are created equal needs our help.

Let's take America by the hand and travel a few steps closer to each other.

Our community garden can become a mustard seed that bears the wonderful fruit of brotherhood and sisterhood in a divided world.

The kingdom of heaven that Jesus prayed and died for needs another
“good Samaritan.”

Why not us?