

LELC Pentecost 5

Our Gospel text for today is probably the second most well-known parable of Jesus. A good Samaritan is even the name we give to someone who stops to help a stranger in need. I'm guessing you all have heard this preached a time or two. It usually gets preached as a reminder that everybody is our neighbor so "love your neighbor" means love everybody – or some variation thereof.

But as I was re-reading it this time I was trying to look at it in some other way than, "Priest and Levite bad, Samaritan good." and I was reminded of something I learned from a counselor I worked with while I was in seminary. She taught me that, when it comes to pain, different people have different responses to pain.

Take the robbers in our story for example. They are a good example of one way people respond to pain in their lives. They pass it on. They inflict pain on someone else. That's usually what is going on with a schoolyard bully. Somewhere, somebody bullies that kid. It is what creates cycles of violence. It's where the adage, "Hurt people hurt people" comes from. Even if those robbers were robbing, and stripping their victim to get money to feed themselves and a family, they have suffered the violence of poverty and the injustice that allows some in a community to enjoy wealth and excess while others starve to death. Robbers are passing on their pain, inflicting it on the man.

Thinking in those terms, the priest and the Levite both demonstrate a second very common response to pain. They avoid it. The text even tells us they both cross over to the other side of the road – maybe so they won't see the poor wounded man, or hear his cries. They avert their eyes and hurry on. Maybe dealing with the man would prove too inconvenient. Maybe they had no donkey and no way to help and they avoided his pain to avoid their own helplessness. Plenty of this goes on in the world. We change the channel, click or swipe to the next story, distract ourselves with other activities – staying busy with "really important stuff" We avoid pain at all kinds of levels: at individuals and corporately as churches, communities, even whole nations. We look away and hurry on.

By contrast, the Samaritan shows us a third way of responding to pain – he moves toward it. Some people do this almost without thinking. Often they end up in helping professions. They see someone in pain and they are able to move toward them, they do what they can to help the one in need. Samaritans were reviled in the society of Jesus' time. One can imagine that maybe a Samaritan would have had

experiences of being mistreated, maybe even beaten and left for dead. Having endured painful experiences often make people able to move toward others who are going through similar things. It's the whole premise of 12-step groups. It's the basis of the seminal book, "Wounded Healer." If and when we can allow ourselves to be healed of our pain we can be a force for good to help others finding healing for their pain.

We don't very often pay attention to the innkeeper. And I think he deserves a word or two. Pain came to the innkeeper's door and there isn't enough story to tell us what sort of response he had to the pain that came to his establishment. If the innkeeper was willing to respect and trust the Samaritan, and provided a room and care for the man without price-gouging him, the innkeeper creates space for healing to occur. The innkeeper becomes an ally in healing. It is important to note that the Samaritan didn't do it all by himself. He sought allies. Perhaps he found one in the innkeeper.

Now, we don't know for sure that is what happened. What if the innkeeper saw this as a chance to make some extra money and over-charged the Samaritan when he came back by? Both ways exist out there. I don't think I have to spell out what Jesus would have thought or said about a person using someone's pain to make as much profit as can be had. It wouldn't be too nice. Then the innkeeper would be no better than the robbers, inflicting pain on someone else.

Now, we actually have a few more people in our text for today to consider. I want to jump out of the parable and talk about the lawyer who came to trick up Jesus. We usually remember him asking the question, "Who is my neighbor" but that wasn't the first question that he asked Jesus. The first one was, "What do I have to do to inherit eternal life?" When he did ask, "Who is my neighbor?" he wasn't asking with an honest desire to know who to include. He was asking for the purposes of knowing who he could exclude. He was asking to know the minimum he could do to still fulfill the law. In this way, the lawyer represents the fourth, and in my opinion, the sneakiest and most harmful way people respond to pain. Denial.

That lawyer was so fixated on the legal technicalities of achieving his own interests he had ceased to think of neighbors as fellow human beings worthy of being cared about whether they fit some narrow definition of neighbor or not. The lawyer was denying the humanity of others and denying the pain that might come into their lives at the same time.

There are lots of ways denial of another's pain can happen. The one that's getting the most visibility these days is the "but they're breaking the law" one. I refer, of course, to some people's response to the asylum-seekers on our borders, to immigrants and undocumented workers. Getting bent out of shape over the legal question is just a dodge. It is really just the denial of the pain and the humanity of another human being - because the same gets said to people getting caught in the web of mass incarceration, or suffering from the epidemic of drug addiction. "I judge you are at fault so your pain is nothing to me."

I kind of wish I could talk with that counselor again. I'd like to ask her a question or two. If people who cause pain are passing on their own pain, are people who avoid other people's pain actually avoiding their own? And are people who deny other people's pain also denying their own? I think that is possible. I think of our own times and the people who are in positions of power and who are doing untold harm, all the while insisting they do so for the sake of this self-interest or that. Is there some unhealed pain in their life that makes them so hard-hearted? I think of our president, who has become some people's favorite punching bag. Is there a deeply wounded soul in deep denial and well-hidden behind all that bluster?

All of which brings me, then, to Jesus. Jesus moved towards people in pain. The whole point of incarnation is God moving toward us, toward humanity to touch and heal our pain. I would have to do some research, but I think the stories of Jesus healing people might actually outnumber the stories in which he is talking about sin and forgiveness. Often they go together. It makes me wonder what our whole Christian tradition would be like - our faith, our doctrines, our proclamation - if we spoke more about broken-ness and healing than we did about sin and forgiveness. Both belong, but I long for a better balance. Mostly because Jesus was always moving toward people, toward their pain. Healing their pain.

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Which brings me to the last person in the story - the one that almost never gets talked about. The man in the ditch. The one who got robbed and beat up and left for dead. What about him? One scholar I heard once said this really is a story about how when you are the one in the ditch, you're not so picky about who is or isn't your neighbor. You just need someone to help so you want that neighbor deal to be as inclusive as possible.

But I'm more interested in what would happen next. What will be his response now to the pain of someone he meets along life's journey? It will kind of depend on what he does with the pain he experienced. If he just gets angry and bitter he might

become a person who passes on pain to others. If he gets hard-hearted and self-righteous he might end up avoiding and denying the pain of others. But if he can let gratitude for the healing he received open his heart he might become someone who is open to the wounds and struggles of those he meets along the way. Gratitude for the grace and mercy shown to him might compel him to do likewise for the rest of his life.

Perhaps that is actually the only question that really matters. Maybe the character we are all most like in this story is the man in the ditch. Pain comes to all of us. It is part of being human. We've all been in some ditch some how, somewhere along the way. Maybe life is in the ditch in some way right now. Maybe we are just holding on, hoping for someone to stop.

I want you to know, Jesus knows our pain. Jesus knows the shape and the depth and the nature of all the ditches we all have been, or currently are, in. And Jesus is still sending folks along our way, crossing our paths, to help us find healing and wholeness for whatever is our broken-ness.

Which means sometimes, we are somebody else's good Samaritan. I read somewhere once that about 75% of the people you meet on any given day are dealing with something pretty heavy. So you should just treat everyone with an extra measure of gentleness and you will be right most of the time.

Maybe today we've gone on our way and we are making choices about how we respond to the pain, our own and that of the world around us. I know some days I probably am doing a little of every one of those options. But I pray for the grace of the Samaritan. And I pray the same for us all.

I pray that we have courage enough to face our avoidance or denial enough to be honest with ourselves about the pain we know or have known. I pray that we find healing for the bruises and wounds – in body, mind, or spirit, And I pray that we feel gratitude, that we have grateful hearts for all the ways God has helped us along the way, the ways God has worked healing in our lives, enough to open our hearts to the pain of others.

May God meet you, wherever you are today. May God give you whatever you need to be healed and made whole for your life's journey. And may God enable you to help any who need you along the way. Amen.