

Lent 1 March 5, 2017
Luke 10:25-42 “Love Worked Into our Lives”

There was a time when those of us who grew up attending Sunday School earned little silver or gold stars after our names for memorizing Bible verses. Because of that, there are verses and prayers that we can rhyme off without a moment's thought. The Golden Rule, the Greatest Commandment, The Lord's Prayer, the 23rd Psalm, and The Ten Commandments are amongst scriptures many of us have known since we were children!

That's how it is with the lawyer in today's Gospel story. When he asks Jesus a question about eternal life, it's a question he knows the answer to. He memorized those verses as a child. He knows them by heart. When Jesus turns the question back to him and asks his opinion on the makings of eternal life, the words of The Greatest Commandment roll right off his tongue: “Thou shalt love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your mind, and all your soul and your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus agrees and says, “Good answer. Do this and live!”

Now, the lawyer could have walked away at that point none the wiser, but then, we are talking about a lawyer here! “Can we get into some of the finer points of the law, Jesus?” “Tell me, who is my neighbor?” Jesus, naturally answers with a great story-- a story of a Good Samaritan (an oxymoron for sure to the lawyer's mind... “Good” and “Samaritan?” in the same sentence? I don't think so!)

When he has finished, Jesus asks, “Which one of these three proved a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers? Was it the Priest? The Levite, or the Samaritan?” The lawyer quickly replies: “The one who showed mercy.” Jesus answers him, “Go and do likewise!”

I imagine a young lawyer walking away, puzzling about how it is that his questions keep getting turned on their heads—so that somewhere on down the road, he suddenly stops in his tracks, as the depth of the challenge that has been issued him begins to sink in.

Like the lawyer, we too may know the verses, parables, and prayers. We may take pride in knowing chapter and verse. Then one day, we are stopped in our tracks with the sudden realization that hearing and knowing simply isn't enough. It is in living out those stories and verses in the choices of our own lives that we and others are transformed by their power.

A contemporary example, I suspect, will bring us closer to the punch that Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan must have delivered in its early telling. Theologian, James Wallace, writes of a twelve-year-old Palestinian boy, Ahmad Khatib, who was shot by Israeli soldiers during street fighting near his home in Jenin, the West Bank. The child had been holding a toy gun. He was taken to an Israeli hospital. After two days, he died. His devastated parents made the heart-rending decision-- to allow their son's organs to be harvested for transplant to Israelis. Six Israelis-- including a two-month-old infant, were blessed with Ahmad's eyes, his heart, his kidneys.... His mother, Abla, said, “My son has died. Maybe he can give life to others.” These parents might have chosen to remain mired in their own grief and rage. Instead they chose to allow the source of their own anguish to bring new life and hope for others.

These two grieving parents are not merely hearers of the Word. They do not stop at reciting verses and parables by rote. Instead, they allow the stories of their faith to breathe compassion through the most painful decisions of their lives. I suspect they have made compassion a practice for so long that, over time, they have been refined as a stunning revelation of divine love.

As the Apostle Paul says of the Colossian Christians of his day, “Love has been worked into their lives by the Spirit.” (1:10, The Message) Paul praises those new Christians, for “the love they continuously extend to fellow believers.” In the gospels, however, Jesus doesn't let us off so easily. He doesn't pat us on the back for simply taking care of our own. Instead, over and over and over again through parable, verse, and example, he challenges us to love and care for our enemies, to pray for those who make our lives a misery, and to extend hospitality to friend and stranger alike. That is what we mean by radical hospitality. Radical hospitality is a deep in your bones hospitality that reaches out far beyond the familiar and the friendly, or simply taking care of our own.

We are invited to consider where and how we allow the words and stories of our faith to be breathed into and through our lives. We must be careful about committing sacred words and stories to memory and imagining that this intellectual work is enough. In the actions of the Samaritan as in the actions of the Palestinian parents, we witness individuals who choose to ignore deeply entrenched patterns of religious and cultural hostility, and instead, allow themselves to see the common humanity of those vulnerable and hurting; and to respond with whole-hearted compassion.

The Palestinian parents don't say, "You've taken his life. Leave us with his body!" They don't even say, "Take his eyes, but leave his heart! Take his liver but leave his lungs!" Instead, they say, "Take whatever can be used to help another." And somewhere in the back of our minds we hear other, more ancient words "this is my body, broken for you." The Samaritan doesn't only stop and clean and bind the man's wounds; he places this stranger on his own donkey, takes him to a safe place, and provides for him, leaves him in the care of another, and promises on his return to pay any additional costs incurred. It is as if once the compassion starts flowing, these people simply don't know how to turn off the spigot! "Do this," says Jesus, "Let your compassion flow as easily as your breath, and you will know what it means to really live."

James Wallace in his commentary on this passage notes that between the dual commands to love God and love neighbor as yourself a simple comma will do—a comma (and nothing so serious as a semi-colon)—separates life from life everlasting." To love God, is to love neighbor, is to love God, is to love neighbor. It's like the rhythm of breathing. The ebb and flow of love is the very stuff of life eternal. The ebb and flow of love is what makes radical hospitality a possibility.

The Golden Rule, The Greatest Commandment, The Story of the good Samaritan— more than recite them, "we need to let ourselves marinate in them—we need to tattoo them on our hearts"—that we too might become living breathing revelations of God's loving compassion... breathing in and breathing out with acts of compassion ...bringing healing to ourselves, to one another, and to our world.

James Wallace, **Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume #3 Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16)**; David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, Editors, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, 2010, pg. 243.

Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion, Father Gregory Boyle, Free Press, 2009.