

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity
St. Paul Anglican Church
January 23, 2024

During this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, we are using the story of the Good Samaritan and today we focus on the phrase: then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him (Lk 10:34). The story states that both the priest and the Levite did the same thing: “They passed by on the opposite side.” Jesus is a wonderful storyteller. The parable of the Good Samaritan is a classic story that has drama and unforgettable characters. It’s crafted by a master storyteller. We are uplifted and inspired by the Good Samaritan who put the injured man on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him.

People hearing this story would have made excuses for the priest and the Levite . The victim was left half dead we are told. If they touched the man and he were dead they would have become ritually unclean and not allowed to officiate, or participate in Temple worship, which their positions required. Others will defend the two religious men saying they were alone on a notoriously dangerous road. This could have been a set up, a trap for a solitary traveler.

Jesus does not condemn the two who passed by. But he refocuses our attention and tells about one person, a foreigner, who crossed over to the other side and took a chance to help the victim. What is it that makes people do such things? Is it only people of extraordinary courage who are willing to risk everything, even their own lives to help another?

There’s a story in Time magazine entitled, “A Conspiracy of Goodness.” A Dutch couple risked their lives during the Holocaust to hide Jews from the Nazis. They were part of a group called “Rescuers” that saved nearly 500,000 lives. When this Dutch couple were asked what made them take such risks they and others responded in a similar way, a way that sounded quite ordinary, “We didn’t think about it.” One of the Rescuers put it this way, “You started off storing a suitcase for a friend and before you knew

it, you are in over your head. We did what any human being would do.” Well, not any human being!

A study was done of these “Rescuers.” It was found that they came from all classes of people, educated and uneducated, rich and poor, believers and even atheists. They were individualists. While people follow the demands of society and their peers, these people weren’t constrained by what others expected them to do. Family, friends and society can exert pressures that restrain good deeds. The Samaritan did not say to himself, “Well that man is a Jew. My people would never help a Jew.”

These “Rescuers” had a history of good deeds. They visited people in hospitals, collected books for poor students, cared for stray animals. Little good deeds were like training for the big deeds that came their way. Many of the “Rescuers” had a sense of universalism; they did not see Jews as “Jews” first, but as human beings. The Samaritan did not see a Jew by the side of the road, he saw an injured person.

The man who fell into the hands of robbers was cared for by a Samaritan. The Samaritan saw beyond prejudice or bias. He saw someone in need and brought him to an inn. “The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend’” (Lk 10:35). This is part of the work of Christ, to bind up the broken-hearted, to heal wounded sinners, and provide comfort to those who mourn. In pouring oil and wine, the wounded person is cleansed and healed from all the wounds and diseases of sin, giving ease, peace, and deep healing. In bringing him to an inn, he is providing refreshment for a traveler. In taking care of him, he is ensuring that he is fed with the choicest of provisions, giving him love and grace and protection from evil.

In any human society, hospitality and solidarity are essential. They require the welcoming of strangers, foreigners, migrants and homeless people. However, when faced with insecurity, suspicion and violence, we tend to mistrust our neighbours. Hospitality is an important witness to the Gospel,

particularly in contexts of religious and cultural pluralism. Welcoming ‘the other’, and being welcomed in turn, is at the heart of ecumenical dialogue. Christians are challenged to turn our churches into inns where our neighbours can find Christ and where real caring is experienced. Such hospitality and care is a sign of the love that our churches have for one another and for all.

When we as followers of Christ move beyond our confessional traditions and choose to practice ecumenical hospitality, we move from being strangers to being neighbours.

As Christians, how far are we prepared to go beyond our traditions? Sometimes our ecclesial and culturally conditioned short-sightedness can prevent us from seeing what is being revealed by the life and witness of sisters and brothers of other Christian traditions. When we open our eyes to see how God’s love is revealed by our fellow Christians, we are drawn closer to them and so are drawn into deeper union with them.

This parable of Jesus not only challenges us to do good, but also to widen our vision. We do not only learn what is good and holy from those who share our confessional or religious worldview, but often from those different from ourselves. The Good Samaritan is often the one we do not expect.

The article I mentioned earlier was entitled a “Conspiracy of Goodness.” Conspiracy is not always a threatening notion, it means “to breathe with.” That is who we are as Christian churches; we are a Conspiracy of Goodness. We breathe together the same breath of God’s Spirit to do good, regardless of peoples’ origins, marital status, race, sexual orientation, or religion. The Spirit breathes in us to make the instinct to help others a natural response; as natural as breathing in and breathing out.

Note in the parable that the Samaritan carried with him the “healing ointments” of the day; wine for cleansing, oil to promote healing. The parable suggests to us that with God’s Spirit we have the necessary

elements for healing and helping. We draw on our natural skills, gifts from God and take the necessary steps to cross the road to the side of the needy and dress their wounds.

We frequently listen to talks on religion – all well and good. But the parable is calling for response. The focus of the parable isn't even on loving God; but on loving neighbor and taking care of our neighbour. To ask, "Who is my neighbor?" is to ask for definition of the object and extent of love and care. Jesus' question to the scholar of the law asks, "Which of these three, in your opinion, was neighbor to the robbers' victim?" This question shifts the attention to the kind of person one is to be, rather than about who are, or are not, one's neighbor.

Jesus' question at the end of the passage is outside the parable, it is his corrective to an improper question. We are a people of another kingdom, we live by another standard. We are to be people who act in love, love that has not drawn boundaries to include some and exclude others, love that expects no "return on the dollar."

I like the symbols in the parable, especially that the Samaritan "poured oil and wine over his wounds and bandaged them." I am struck that he had these healing elements with him as he traveled. We don't always get the chance to go get the supplies, skills, education, or even another person, to help. We travel with what we need, thanks to the Holy Spirit we are already equipped for healing. We draw upon the Spirit that was given us at Baptism and we trust this presence as we attend to the wounded.

Something in the Samaritan was moved, like those "Rescuers" in the magazine article were. He did not go through a long debate about the merits of this wounded person. Unlike the Samaritan, we seem to be less "moved with pity." Even some Christians have turned their backs upon the wounded, abandoned and sick in our world. Let us pray for the grace to respond to the wounded and injured by the side of the road and to carry them to the place where they can receive generous care.