

May 5, 2019

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

I'm sure that all of you know, at least in bit, one of the most famous stories in the Bible – Jesus's story of the Good Samaritan. You may remember that it begins with a lawyer standing up and asking Jesus what he had to do to go to heaven – inherit eternal life. Jesus asks him what he thinks the Bible says about this and the man, correctly, answers that he is to love God with everything he has, body and soul, and love your neighbor as yourself. The lawyer famously asks, "And who is my neighbor?" And Jesus goes ahead and tells the story we know as "The Good Samaritan." At the end, Jesus asks which character in the story was the neighbor. And the man's answer is interesting. He doesn't say, "The Samaritan," as we sort of assume. He says, "the one who showed mercy." And Jesus says, "Go and do likewise."

Today's sermon isn't really about the Good Samaritan. The Gospel is one of Jesus's last times with his disciples. Everyone is still a little unsettled about the resurrection stuff and from what we read in the story this morning, it looks like everyone has sort of gone back to their old lives, almost their lives before Jesus. We find out that that's not really an easy thing. So, their fishing, and a mysterious person shows up, gives them fishing instructions, and they immediately recognize that it has to be Jesus. Their experience tells them it must be Jesus. And, of course, Impetuous, brash, violent, unthinking, Peter jumps out of the boat, leaving everyone behind to do the work. And they all get to the beach and Jesus has breakfast ready. And then, we're at the center of the story. Famously, Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves him. And, you have to remember that Peter three times denied ever knowing Jesus in his most dire moment. And Jesus, three times, says "Feed my lambs; Tend my sheep; Feed my sheep."

But to really understand this, you have to remember a few other Bible stories. Peter wanted to rule the world. He wanted to be Jesus's champion. In the conversations, you hear that he wants to be leader, and is even willing to be violent to accomplish his goals. And we have to strip away the fantasy visions church people have of sheep and shepherds. People didn't aspire to this job. In fact, Peter isn't a shepherd. He's a fisherman. Originally, at the beginning of the story, Jesus offered him a job fishing, a job he knew. Now, he's offering a job lower down the ladder. Shepherding. Feeding sheep.

Now the reason I brought up the story of the Good Shepherd at the beginning is that the original question was what does it look like to love someone as yourself, and what does it mean to be a neighbor. And, I've found over the years that that's a little more complicated than it seems. Candidly, many of us have a deep streak of narcissism that runs through us. We all can be more than a bit self-centered. We also have a tendency to think we're the rulers of the universe and conquerors of our world – even if it is a tiny world. So, loving your neighbor as yourself can be a bit tricky, at least in practice. And mercy, well, true mercy that asks for nothing in return, that can be a bit cagy.

But in today's story, this is what we see played out for us. It's important to remember who Peter has been. And it's important to remember what he did. And while it's all there, Jesus, showing mercy, never brings it up. Instead, Jesus loves him as he loves himself. And he offers Peter the job that, in their time, is the job that was at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder of their time. Peter hasn't really displayed that he can do a job higher up the ladder, so he gives him the starting job at the bottom. The same one that he, Jesus, holds. Feeding lambs and tending sheep. It's a remarkable story.

Honestly, very few of us do very well at either story. We're not the best lovers of our neighbors – we have too many categories we're trying to fit people into. And we're not always the best at mercy. And we don't want to start in the jobs that Jesus offers us.

Many people tell me that they come to church for answers to the problems they see around them, comment on the world that is always willing to blow itself up at the blink of an eye. To that, I think I'd say that we should start by learning who we are. What makes us tick. And then love the people around you. My only advice: start with the ones at the bottom.

Amen.

Pastor Erdos
Easter 3
St John 21:2-19