

The Saturday Preceding Pentecost VII
The Baptismal, Confirmation and Retirement Eucharist of the
VI Bishop of Kentucky
All Saints Episcopal Center

Proper 10C: Deuteronomy 30:9-14; Col 1:1-14; Luke 10:25-37

Edwin (aka Ted) your bishop, was sent a set of questions by the Search Committee some 18 years ago. To a question about what kind of bishop he would be, he responded, [my conviction is that] “the commitment to pastoral care and a prophetic bias toward the least, the last, and the lost are of a piece.” – the commitment to pastoral care and a prophetic bias toward the least, the last, and the lost are of a piece.

Ted’s excellent pastoral care and his ability to keep the prophetic edge before the flock are well known among laity and clergy alike, not only here in this diocese but in the larger church. He has been a superlative pastor and that has informed his prophetic presence and visa versa. I believe that he has lived out his vision. As he moves from the role of Bishop of Kentucky to that of retired bishop, you might want to test my assumption. One might want to examine this claim in light of the gospel proclaimed this day to see if it matches up to this outrageous parable of who it is who saves.

We have commonly understood this parable as a pastoral response to those in need. We have interpreted this Samaritan as Good because he has helped the down and out – the guy beaten by robbers, bankers, oil executives and the like, and left as one half dead in the ditch. Yet, in this parable of the so called Good Samaritan, Jesus adds a twist to this logic that focuses on our souls even before we begin this noble mission to the halt, the maimed and the blind. Marshall McLuhan taught us some 40+ years ago that “the medium is the message.” With this parable, that means us—we are the medium – you and me. We, the Samaritans, are the mission.

In order to be that message in the best tradition of “What Would Jesus Do” we need to do some post modern deconstruction of the Biblical text. Modern biblical studies and biblical archeology have helped us look anew at this parable of the Good Samaritan. To have been in Jesus’ presence either as this Israelite lawyer, or a Jewish peasant, one’s reaction would be much different from that of the author of the gospel according to Luke or most of 2000 years of Christian interpretation. To those who first heard Jesus’ story, the idea of a half-dead man and a compassionate Samaritan on the Jericho road would be, if not, cognitive dissonance – an outright impossibility.

Little in this parable is expected, except for the fact that any fool walking alone down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho could expect to be attacked and left half-dead. Some scholars claim that the priest and Levite could not carry out their ministerial duties when they got to the temple in Jerusalem if they had stopped to help, because it looked as if the victim were dead. Yet, we now know that the highest religious duty for the Jew was burying the dead, especially in this case where there was

no one else to do it. Ritual contamination wasn't the issue. Those listening to Jesus' parable would have been startled by the priest's and Levite's breach of their religious duty toward this man. The lawyer would have been appalled by the transgression of the law, the anti-clerical peasants would have just gloated – how like the clergy. Popular culture today would perhaps replace Jesus characters with a politician, a medical insurance claims adjustor, or a lawyer.

So first there is the priest, then the Levite, but in the world of the story, the question is, “Who will come along next?” If we, as Palestinian Jews, were listening to the story for the first time, we would expect the next person to come along to be Mr. Regular Nice-guy – you and me. The first century Israelite listener expected the third character to be a layperson – a John Doe Israelite. But Jesus does the unexpected and chooses as the third character, the Israelites' mortal enemy, a Samaritan. It is difficult for us in this supposedly open, diverse culture to come up with such a despised person for us. It's difficult for us to get the gut-wrenching twist that Jesus put in this story by choosing a Samaritan. Whoever that might be for you (whether you like yourself for feeling that way or not), that is the person.

Given that fact, the listener is now presented with a problem: With whom shall I identify in the story? By the time Luke wrote the story down, and for most of the 2000 years which have followed, the person to identify with has been the Samaritan. But if you were a Jew, lawyer or peasant in first century Palestine, you just could not do that, anymore than I could identify with a suicide bomber.

No, you are forced to identify with this half-dead victim. Fortunately for you, you are completely out of it. If you would have been conscious at all you would have refused the Samaritan's ministrations and waited for one of “your people” to come along or died waiting. As it is, you are more helpless than you know, and your mortal enemy saves your life.

This is a hard saying. The parable says that the person you would be least likely to turn to if you needed help can save your life. The person or institution who has pushed you to the edge, the person or institution who stands for all that is wrong in your perception of the world might just be the only one who cares enough to pick you up out of the ditch. The one who exposes your vulnerability, who strips away the mask of your half-deadness will bring you to life. This is not the picture of reality we want. We carefully choose those people to help us who are safe – who will allow us to keep our masks on – who will tell us that we are fine, even when we aren't.

What happens to those who do expose us, even if they have saved our lives? These good Samaritans don't just help us, they save us with their own lives. For if we take the story out to its logical conclusion, what we might be forced to admit, is that the Samaritan was ultimately accused of beating and robbing the man in the first place. The authorities just could not accept the half-dead man's story, and the priest and

Levite, even if found would not have admitted their sins of omission. The world for them could not possibly look this way. The Samaritan must be done away with.

Isaiah the prophet wrote about him: *He was despised and rejected; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.*

The author of John's gospel wrote it this way: *He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not. He came to what was his own, and his own people received him not.*

This is not some story about how to be a good Jew, or a good Christian, or even a good Samaritan. It is not a story about trying to be good, (or as your Bishop loves to quote Mae West, Goodness has nothing to do with it, honey.”). It is a story about our half-deadness and the possibility of our salvation—a salvation that always comes from the most unlikely of places. A salvation that comes to us when we are stripped, and robbed, and half-dead along the road. It comes to us when we can no longer resist. It comes through a backwater Galilean Jewish preacher, who was executed by the Roman state by the better-than-thou Jewish religious establishment. It comes to us through Jesus and all who would imitate his lostness, his leastness, and his lastness.

St. Paul: *Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.*

If we must say anything about our lives as Christians, let it not be that our bounden duty is to help others in need, or that we are open to many points of view, or tolerant, or even compassionate. If we must say anything about our lives in this place, let it not be that our theological position, or outreach ministries, or our excellent formation opportunities warm the human heart and feeds the human soul. If we must say anything about our lives, let us confess that we are all in the same ditch, and that through the gracious goodness of one who was despised and executed on the gibbet of a cross, we have been ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven.

When I accepted this invitation to preach at this event (or was hoodwinked into it), I did not want this to be a roast, a litany of successes, or anecdotes about Ted's episcopate in this wonderful diocese. (He is terribly embarrassed by such things, and I would not want to embarrass my dearest friend who has been to me one who even pulled me out of some ditches.) You can share those moments of your own to your hearts content in the Prayers of the People and the celebration that follows.

I turn instead to his world, from a sermon recently proclaimed by him at the consecration of our beloved Jay Magness. Ted said this: “1600 years ago, St. Augustine was preaching at the ordination of the Bishop of Carthage. A main illustration of his sermon had to do with a man who had the name Lucky. Despite his name, the reality of his life was such that his name should have been Job. He suffered one calamity after another and lived with such misfortune that

his name became a kind of reproach. No matter how many people would call him Lucky, he continued to be unfortunate.

“Then Augustine, good preacher that he was, cut to the point. Something similar happens when you address a person as bishop who is not a bishop at heart. And then Augustine asks a rhetorical question. Who is the bishop who is called bishop but is not one? Augustine answers his own question, and when I (Ted) heard this answer recently at a RC retreat, I felt cut to the heart. Augustine defines the person who is misnamed “bishop” as he who rejoices in that honor rather than the salvation of God’s flock. Who in that office seeks his own ends not that of Jesus Christ.

Ted continues, “Members of the EPF have been keeping a prayer vigil so that when Jay Magness takes on the name bishop he will be an authentic holder of this name, so authentic, that he will point to and be a sacrament of him who is the shepherd and bishop of our souls, our Lord Jesus Christ. That will happen as the trajectory of Jay’s ministry matches the ends, the purpose, the mission of Jesus Christ and his trajectory toward this wounded, wounding, yet ever so loved world.” (End quote.)

From my personal perspective and my experience of thirty + years of ministering with Ted and for Ted, and from the reflections that I have gleaned from so many of you over these past 17 years, I am impelled to assert that this bishop whom you call “Ted” was not, I repeat, was not misnamed.

On this day of celebration, of baptism and confirmation, may it be so for all of us who have claimed the faith of the Crucified and Risen One. May our witness with Ted’s be so compelling that this child who is to be baptized and these candidates who are to be confirmed will be enlivened and encouraged by the Spirit who is our witness to this unlikely Samaritan whom we dare to call Good.

Larry Handwerk
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