

Wesley United Methodist Church

July 10, 2016

„The Parable of the Kindly Innkeeper.“

Luke 10:25-37

Peter Godwin was a bit of an oddity in the African village where he grew up. Though a British citizen, Peter and his family had moved to Rhodesia when he was just a child. His mother, a missionary doctor, was assigned to start a vaccination program. Under her supervision thousands of people were inoculated against tuberculosis, smallpox, and other diseases. For some diseases, a shot was needed, but for others the vaccination was much more pleasant. It only involved putting a small dose of medicine on a sugar cube and feeding the cube to the patient. Little Peter was often enlisted to carry the tray of sugar cubes and to inspect children's mouths to make sure they had fully eaten the cube.

In the 1970s, civil war in Rhodesia forced the Godwin family to return to England, where a now grown Peter found work as a journalist. The London Sunday Times sent Peter back to South Africa in 1986 to cover a clash between the Marxist government and armed rebels. While there, Peter had a great urge to slip into Mozambique, an area officially closed to foreign journalists. He managed to make it to Mozambique, but he was captured by a band of heavily armed rebels. The rebels forced Peter to return with them to their base camp. It was a two-day hike, during which Peter was often kicked or hit by his captors. When he arrived at the camp, Peter was hauled before the commander. By chance, he heard the commander address his servant in a dialect he recognized from his childhood in Rhodesia. Peter began speaking this language to the astonished commander, who demanded to know where Peter had learned the language. Peter explained a little about his childhood in Africa and when he mentioned his family name was Godwin, the commander's whole manner changed. The big man rolled up his shirt sleeve to expose the scar that vaccinations often leave. Peter's mother had vaccinated this man when he was just a child. And the commander had received a medicine-coated sugar cube from Peter's own hand. Only moments before, Peter Godwin had been treated like an enemy by the rebels; now he was a welcome guest among them. They returned him safely to the area where they had captured him and even posed for a picture with him before they left. It's nice, isn't it? When good works are rewarded.

It's even nicer when no reward is anticipated. A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho when he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him, and left him for dead.

You know the story as well as I. It was a seventeen-mile journey between Jerusalem and Jericho and muggings were not unknown. And so, an unfortunate man lay beside the road in desperate straits. A priest passed by and a Levite. The fact that they were Jewish religious leaders is incidental. Jesus could have easily said a Methodist pastor and a Catholic priest passed by. Insensitivity knows no race or creed. Regardless of religious affiliation, they should have known better. That they were leaders in their faith makes the story even more disturbing.

That the hero of the story was a Samaritan was even more shocking to Jesus' listeners. Relations between the Jews and the Samaritans were so strained that not only was it surprising that the Samaritan would offer assistance, it was equally as surprising that the Jewish man in the ditch would accept the help. There was a saying in those days, „The Jew who accepts help from a Samaritan delays the coming of the kingdom.“

Even more surprising is the role of the innkeeper. Innkeepers obviously played a different role in Jesus' day than they do in ours. Can you imagine someone bringing a beaten-up man to the local Holiday Inn and saying to the manager, „This poor fellow is going to need some looking after. You take care of it and I'll reimburse you when I return?“ In fact, maybe we should call this parable „the parable of the kindly innkeeper“ rather than the parable of the Good Samaritan.

During my seminary training days, there was a woman in our class named Marjorie who resents jokes about the priest and the Levite who passed by on the other side. They remind her of times in her nursing career. Because of understaffing at the hospital where she worked, she ignored one patient in order to tend to another. Marjorie felt that honoring the compassion of the Samaritan does not require attacking the priest and the Levite.

Marjorie wanted to focus on the innkeeper. The victim of the mugging would need several weeks to recover, for the text describes him as half dead. „It's one thing to deliver emergency care, but it's another to provide long-term care. The tedious job of lifting a spoon to someone's lips, the drudgery of emptying the bed pan, the burden of turning the body and changing dressings, the exhaustion of waking in the night to the moaning of the victim who relives the violence in a nightmare.“ All this is what the innkeeper did. And he did it in trust that the Samaritan would return and pay him. There is a level of trust that is uncommon today than it was back then.

This story calls us to renew our sensitivity to the needs of the people we encounter. This story is a call to well-doing. This is the kind of story we use to wash out our brain. It reminds us that kindness and decency are possible in the world.

The most important person in any situation in which compassion and courage is involved is the first person to act. After one person acts, then others are prone to respond as well but someone needs to step out from the crowd and

go first. This is what Jesus meant when he referred to us as a light set on a candlestick. God has planted us in the world to set an example of both kindness and decency. After people see our willingness to get involved, then they will get involved too. Not only do we respond to human need out of our neighborly concern, but also as our way of witnessing to God in this world. There is a man on a cross who says to us, „What I did for you, you are to do for others.“ This is what following Jesus is all about.

Our text for today comes in response to the question of a lawyer, „Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?“ „What does the law say?“ Jesus asks. The lawyer replied, „You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind. And you must love your neighbor as yourself.“

The priest and the Levite loved God. We don't doubt that. They were probably returning from doing their religious duties at the temple in Jerusalem. Doing our religious duties is not enough. Our faith is about loving God, but it is also about loving our neighbor. It is about doing good with no expectation of a reward. It is about following the example of a Good Samaritan and a kindly innkeeper. It is about acting with kindness and decency. You know that, of course. And I know that, but we need to be reminded. We need to renew our sensitivity to the needs of the people we encounter. We need to be reminded that kindness and decency are possible in this world. In fact, they are an essential ingredient in what it means to be a follower of Jesus.