

Sermon for Proper 10

RCL Lectionary, Year C

[Deuteronomy 30:9-14](#) / [Psalm 25:1-9](#) / [Colossians 1:1-14](#) / [Luke 10:25-37](#)

The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

July 11th, 2010

The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour

Mill Valley, California

Ethicists, Heroes, and Samaritans

It's high summer in the Bay Area, and you can hardly walk a block anywhere without encountering some steadfast soul bearing a clipboard. There are probably more petitions to sign than citizens to sign them, it seems – everything from immigration reform to environmental concerns to protesting some plan or another by government, by the local school board, by the local utility. Then there are the fundraisers and membership drives, from ACLU to Greenpeace and the Sierra Club, to local grass-roots organizations out to raise money for thread-bare budgets. (Maybe this presents an idea for our next parish pledge campaign!)

But in a rather remarkable moment on Friday, as I walked hastily past the hundredth clip-boarder on a street corner in San Francisco, he shouted after me, "I could make you a hero in two minutes!" It almost made me do a double-take. Hero in two minutes, huh? Is that not evidence of our sound-byte age, of our cultural drive to get it done and get it done quick? But there were deeper questions that floated up as I pondered his amusing claim that was so seriously offered. What does it mean to be a hero? And can anyone really become one in two minutes?

It immediately brought to mind today's Gospel, a well-trod passage of scripture. The parable of the Good Samaritan sits, of course, in our popular lexicon as the example of a generous soul – so self-explanatory to us we can easily lose sight of the greater subtleties of Jesus' teaching in this passage. The parable arises in the context of a conversation with a lawyer – a careful and assiduous soul who is also quite familiar to us because his life is like so many of ours. At least it is like mine. This lawyer is not just a bearer of the prosecutorial hermeneutic of suspicion that we all know -- how our society revels in it! His question to Jesus to test him also reveals that this lawyer is a consummate ethicist. Like the faithful of his age or ours, an age of order, an age of laws, he is deeply concerned about doing what's right, about being upright in the eyes of God. Maybe in the parlance of our age, he, too, wants to be a hero of sorts. For aren't our heroes the greatest ethicists, out for the cause of justice, always able to do or at least say the right things at the right time? And so when he articulates the summary of the law – love of God, love of neighbor – and receives Jesus' praise, he still yet desires more. He needs to justify himself. He feels the need to know he's a good and faithful follower of the deep truths of his Jewish tradition, just as we feel the need to know we are good and faithful followers of the deep truths of our traditions, too. And so he asks, "Who is my neighbor?" Maybe he wants Jesus to affirm what he's done right for those whom he counts as his closest neighbors. He wants to know he's done enough in his carefully managed orbit of social contacts and colleagues. Again, he's a good ethicist. . . yet he wants to know he's done right by God not on God's terms *but on his own terms*.

So the parable of the Good Samaritan unsettles his self-serving pursuit of righteousness and ours, too. For Jesus offers up examples of the priest and the Levite – among the keepers of righteousness of his day. It is not that the priest and the Levite are mean people for passing by on the other side of the road. What they are doing as good ethical people is quite natural: They have responsibilities, obligations, and rituals to uphold. The man was left for dead – touching a potentially dead body or even the blood of the injured would have likely rendered any priest or Levite ritually unclean and unable to attend to their socially sanctioned duties for a time. So busy were they in attending to their good, ethical righteous tasks that they had no time to stop for an errand of mercy. There could be a hundred, if not a thousand

different reasons – some of them quite legitimate in the eyes of self-justification and the call of righteousness – that they pass by on the other side.

But the one who can stop, the one who can offer compassion to the robbed and laid low, the one who can afford the time is this Samaritan, who is oddly enough a pariah, a bit of an anti-hero in the eyes of the lawyer, the priest, the Levite, and the faithful Israelites of the age. It's the Samaritan, the outsider and unexpected, who is free of the self-justifying strictures that keep the priest and the Levite away. It's the Samaritan who makes the parable unsettling to our own self-justifying ways. It's the social outcast who has nothing to lose who is free to do what is right in the eyes of God's kingdom, touch the half-dead man and offer healing. The Samaritan becomes the hero of the story precisely because he is not out to justify himself like everyone else; and because he has no self-justifying stumbling block, his God-given compassion can turn him into a good neighbor, selflessly offering mercy to a stranger so desperately in need.

In our reading today from Deuteronomy, the Israelites are at the border of the Promised Land, looking in. They are receiving their final teachings from Moses before they cross the Jordan with Joshua's leadership. Consummate ethicists as well – though, as we all know, not all that successful given their repeated failures in the wilderness – they continue to strive to know what it will take to please God; to have God on their side; to be justified before their Lord. But tucked away amidst the difficult passages of laws and customs that dominate Deuteronomy, in today's reading, Moses teaches them an important truth – the commandments they are receiving from God are a gift; a grace so much more than a narrow set of laws by which they are to be measured. They are not to look high and low for God's command as though it is an unattainable mystery. Rather, the heart of God's commands is near to them. It is the word written in their hearts, and perhaps on their very lips if they will only utter it, if they will only listen.

One of our great spiritual struggles as Christians is that we, too, often sit at the edge of the Promised Land, the Kingdom of God, and look in, wondering what we must do – good ethicists all – to inherit God's abundant love for us. What will it take for God to take delight in prospering us in all our undertakings? What will it take for us to become two-minute heroes, that we may be justified in the eyes of our Creator? We look and strive and search high and low sometimes for that answer, as though it is outside ourselves, an unattainable mystery. And if only we could find it, we could take charge of our own justification before our Maker. How easily we forget that God in Christ has already justified us. We need no longer be in charge of our own righteousness, our own worthiness in God's eyes. This is why we gather in worship, baptize, and break the bread week after week. It reminds us that Christ has justified us, that the Word of God has drawn near, the love of God and love of neighbor has come among us as gift. We are challenged to embrace that gift and live into it more deeply -- to become God's faithful followers and even Jesus' disciples and friends. But this means putting God's love ahead of our striving to be good ethicists, our struggle to be heroes.

The divine gift of wisdom in the Parable of the Good Samaritan is that God's command to love our neighbors is rooted deeply in the compassionate heart, not in the assiduously ethical or our righteous quests to justify ourselves before God. Mercy is most abundant when we forget our self-justifying tendencies and therefore become like the Samaritan: we then have nothing to lose when we offer help to those most in need. Being a neighbor is about letting go of the carefully strictured self-righteousness of the priests and Levites of every age and embracing the self-emptying love of the Samaritan, and that of our beloved Christ.

True heroes are true neighbors, I reckon, and they are not made in two minutes by signing a petition or merely pledging to an organization. Neighbors in the Kingdom are a different kind of hero altogether. They forget themselves and remember God's gracious love and God's children first and foremost. They subordinate self-justification to the Way of the cross and the self-offering of communion. They give themselves in love to those most in need, expecting nothing in return. And in doing so, by God's grace alone and without the grasping self-striving of their own, they become like the Samaritan, heroes for the Kingdom of our loving God, the Kingdom of eternal life that has drawn near in Christ Jesus.