



# Poland Presbyterian Church

*At the Green since 1802*

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**July 10, 2016**

**A Sermon by Brent J. Eelman**

## **Road Kill**

### **Luke 10:25-37**

*Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus.\* 'Teacher,' he said, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?'<sup>26</sup>He said to him, 'What is written in the law? What do you read there?'<sup>27</sup>He answered, 'You shall 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 your neighbor as yourself.'<sup>28</sup>And he said to him, 'You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.'*

*29 But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'<sup>30</sup>Jesus replied, 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead.<sup>31</sup>Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.<sup>32</sup>So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.<sup>33</sup>But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity.<sup>34</sup>He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him.<sup>35</sup>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."<sup>36</sup>Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?'<sup>37</sup>He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'*

I had a pretty clever sermon prepared for this morning, but sometime between Thursday evening and this morning, it became apparent that clever was not good enough. The events of this past week, the deaths of two black men and then the murder of five policemen in Dallas, have overwhelmed our news and our collective consciousness, (and they should!). Consequently, the content of my sermon is different than planned, but ironically, it is still the same message, just more immediate, more urgent. Let us consider the parable of the Good Samaritan.

The occasion for Jesus' parable was the question, "what must I do to have eternal life?" Certainly, all of us think about this question and struggle with it. The promise of eternal life is something we cling to and hope for. Eternal life is about the future. It is about hope. It is about promise. The common thread we all share is our own mortality, and our fear regarding the unknown. "What must I do to have eternal life?"

The lawyer who asked this question of Jesus already knew the answer, "Love God with all your being, and your neighbor as yourself." But he asked a follow-up question. "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus responded with the well-known story of the Good Samaritan. The neighbor we are called to love is also the one we deeply distrust and despise.

Samaritans were hated by the Hebrew people.

- First, they were believed to be racially impure. During the Babylonian captivity they supposedly intermarried with their captors.
- Second, they were heretics. They didn't have their theology right, and worshipped at a mountain instead of the Temple. Hebrew people believed that Samaritans perverted the teachings of Moses.
- Third, they were regarded as unclean. If a Samaritan so much as touched a Jew, he or she would have to go through a ritual cleansing process in order to be acceptable to the community.

The division between the Hebrew people and the Samaritans was bitter, ugly and existed for generations. They were divided racially, ideologically, and socially. They had nothing but contempt for each other and there was no interaction between the two groups. Jesus' parable about neighbor love, as the key to eternal life, was surely shocking to the ears of his Jewish audience. A Samaritan helped a Jew. Christ's parable was about crossing social, political, racial, ideological, religious, and economic divisions to assist, to help, and to be helped.

There is still a small Samaritan community in the middle east, (about 1000 people). But that is not where the divisions are in our society. No. This week brought into stark relief that we are still a divided world and we are willing shed blood, destroy lives, kill and maim to pay homage to the principalities and powers that divide us.

- We are divided by religions: Jew, Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist... and these differences have manifest themselves in bloodshed, death and destruction.
- We are divided politically. We are in the midst of what promises to be a very ugly political season. The political process, which at one time was seen as "the art of the possible", and the ability to negotiate and compromise between polarities, has become a "zero sum" exercise. "I am right. You are wrong." This binary approach has divided communities, families, and our nation itself. We think this will be inconsequential?
- We are divided racially. The tragic events of this past week witness to the racial divisions that cast a pall-like shadow over our history, and still haunt our common life.
- We are divided economically. There is a large segment of our society that feels as though they have been left out and forgotten by the powers that be. Many of them are scraping by, looking for some type of hope, perhaps a "messiah" who will deliver them. They are white, they are black, they are brown... but they have one thing in common: they feel neglected, wounded and left by the side of the road. Somehow they have been played against each other.

No, the issues today are not about Jews and Samaritans... but the visceral contempt which characterized their antipathy for each other, is still manifest in our world today.

We come to church on Sunday, asking, "What must I do to inherit eternal life." And Jesus responds, "Reach across these divisions. Take the risk of alienation that accompanies being a neighbor to

- those who are different,

- those who think differently,
- those who believe differently,
- those who pray differently,
- and those who look different.

Reach across the boundaries in the same as the Good Samaritan did.

Consider the risks the Samaritan took:

- The risk of rejection: The man dying by the roadside could have looked at the Samaritan leaning over him, and said, "I would rather die than have you help me."
- The risk of blind prejudice: The innkeeper could have seen him approach with the dying man and said, "Don't come in here. We don't allow your kind."
- The risk of personal safety: The Samaritan, by merely stopping, could have been mugged himself.

Jesus speaks to us, "Take these risks, and inherit eternal life."

There is an easier way and many choose that route. It is the way of blame.

- "It is the President's fault."
- "It is the Republican's fault."
- "The Democrats are to blame."
- "It's the media's fault."

This is an easy way to go. There is no risk. You don't have to take responsibility. You can even feel a bit self-righteous. Often our default reaction to these tragic events is to blame. But we should not become stuck in a blame game. It only leads to more vindictiveness, more division, more bloodshed, and more death. It is not the way to eternal life.

The other easy way: denial.

- "There's really not a problem."
- "It is only being created and fueled by the media."

But we cannot deny bodies of the innocent lying dead in the streets. They are visible evidence of cultural, social, and economic divisions in our society.

Ironically, these two approaches were taken by the Priest and Levite when they saw the man dying by the side of the road. I can almost hear them saying to themselves.

- "He shouldn't have been out here during the evening."
- "He got what was coming."
- "I am just too busy, perhaps someone else will stop."
- "It is too risky to stop and help... something might happen to me."

Blame and denial are easy and convenient, but they are not Christ's way to eternal life.

Jesus taught that eternal life is about being a good neighbor. It is about reaching across the boundaries that divide us. It is about taking the risk to stop, measure the situation, and respond in love. I believe that we can respond faithfully to the events of this past week. Not by blaming, nor by denial.

1. Reach across the divisions. We need to find ways to speak with one another across our political, economic, racial, and social divides without blaming, accusing and vilifying. Language does matter. We need to find the language, the words if you will, that do not further alienate and engender more contempt and hatred.
2. We need to affirm, as Jesus did in this parable, that there is more that unites us as neighbors than divides us. We are all children of God. We need to find concrete ways to express this. It means that we have a greater mission beyond coming together here and preaching and singing about our salvation... we need to live it in the world, by expressing love of neighbor... or risk losing it.

Let me conclude on a hopeful note: This message of Jesus is not some "la de da" pie in the sky, dream. I have seen it become real in the lives of people like you and me. I have seen divisions... intractable divisions overcome by people of faith who were willing to take risks. Let me share one with you: Anne and Lynne.

They were both members of my church in New York. One was the president of an organization called "Life Right". It was a group that came together to oppose the practice of abortion. They were involved in civil disobedience, including chaining themselves to clinics and physician's offices. The other was the president of Planned Parenthood. She was equally involved in women's health issues and the availability of abortion. Both were members of my congregation. Both showed up each Sunday.

One might think this would be a pastor's nightmare, but both were a blessing to me, to that church and to the greater community. They taught Sunday School together. I know that my own daughter's Christian education was formed by their instruction, but also by the faith they exhibited. They prayed together, sang hymns together. A number of years later, when I moved on to Texas, they drove down together in a van, to attend a Sunday School teachers event, and had dinner with us. After the dinner, when they left, I asked Karen, "Who do you think is right?"

Karen responded, "They both are." They were both right by risking reputation and scorn to reach across what many regard as an intractable boundary marked by contempt and scorn. They were both right, by bringing civility to an extremely divisive issue. They were both right, in their acknowledgement that there exists common ground for all humanity... it is the common ground before the cross of Christ.

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus illustrates two approaches to the hate filled divisions that vex our world. We can ignore, blame, and walk on by... or we can take the risk to care, cross the boundaries difference and contempt, and practice neighbor love. Only one way leads to eternal life. This is good news. Amen