

If you are a fan of country music you probably know the song by Garth Brooks, “I’ve Got Friends in Low Places.” While the song is not particularly edifying, the title is a good paraphrase of our gospel story today. To have friends in low places means that you have crossed the borders that separate us from our neighbors, despite the social consequences. And to call one who is despised or shunned by others, “friend” lies at the heart of the Christian imperative.

It’s both a privilege and a challenge to talk about the text that includes the parable of the Good Samaritan. If I were to choose one story in the Bible that contains the essence of the entire gospel message, it would be this one. The familiarity of this narrative may cause us to dismiss its transformative power. But in the context of this tragic and complicated week, with fear and violence erupting around us, I believe this parable has much to teach us. What gives this story life and meaning is not how we understand it, but how we live it once we step outside the doors of this church.

For those who have been around the Christian faith for a while, this is not the first time you have heard this account. We listen from the comfortable perspective of the merciful Samaritan who chooses to come to the aid of one in need. I'd like to think that if I met a stranger on the road, beaten and battered by life, that I would stop and do all I could to help. But let's be honest, many of us are likely to have good, logical reasons, like the priest and the Levite, to stay at a safe distance from possible trouble.

While acknowledging the need, our fears often cause us to decide that the risk is too great to become involved. Little by little we are desensitized to the suffering around us. Walls we erect to keep us safe also limit our vision and our heart's capacity for mercy. How easily we miss opportunities to "do" love! But Jesus calls us up short with this subversive story.

Jesus defied not only the social boundaries of his time, but also the limits of the law of Judaism. The lawyer, in this story, a faithful Jew, was hungry to know what a life of faith required of him. He asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" In

rabbinical style Jesus asked him another question, “What is written in the law?” The lawyer repeated a basic teaching of the Torah, “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength, and your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus replied, “Do this and you will live.”

So simple and profound, yet the lawyer pressed, hoping to get clarification, “And who is my neighbor?” Perhaps he was asking Jesus to define the boundaries of who he was not required to love. Instead Jesus told him a story that illustrated what a neighbor does. Jesus asked him, “Which of the three proved neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” And the lawyer admitted that the Samaritan, one whom Jews considered unclean and unapproachable, was the source of love. “Go and do likewise,” Jesus said.

This edgy scripture calls us not only to examine the ways in which our love of God is practiced in the love of neighbor, but to question the assumptions we’ve created that keep us divided. It seems we are all grappling with the same question, who is my

neighbor? But the walls between us are becoming increasingly impenetrable, adding to the suspicion and fear of one another. Placing the Samaritan figure as the protagonist is the twist to this story. God often shows up in the least expected places and when we fail to see, or respond, we miss God's presence in the world. No one knew victory would come out of the disgrace of the cross. No one expected God's power to be revealed through vulnerability. Crossing established boundaries to share our common humanity changes the landscape of our hearts.

Several years ago I took a group of young people on a mission to Philadelphia to the Stenton Family Manor, a shelter for inner city homeless families. We had the opportunity to share in the lives of those who for various reasons had lost their homes and security and had been living on the streets. This shelter accommodated people of all faiths and nationalities and our programming would have to be sensitive to that. Rather than talk about the love of Jesus, we had to be and do that love.

Each morning our mission team framed the day in prayer and scripture before we left for the shelter and our evening ended with reflections and prayers for those we served. While our task was to provide structure and fun for the children, the connections we were forming were far more important. What self-discoveries were made as we broke through our own fears, assumptions and biases to form the bonds of friendship! We took with us, changed hearts and perspectives and hopefully left behind an imprint of God’s love. Those whom we had considered “other” had much to teach us about our common humanity. Jesus knew that risking love, especially to those rejected, transforms us all.

So how do we respond as Christians to this very difficult week that started as a celebration of our independence, and ended in tragic conflict, violence and isolation? Many of us are left feeling numb and helpless to make a difference. Perhaps it begins with dismantling that old proverb that “Good fences make good neighbors.” We must break through our own fears, loving when the world expects us to hate and drawing near with compassion.

Writer and theologian Sara Miles, who established a widespread ministry among the homeless, said this, “I think we are being called to something harder than being conventional good Samaritans, to understand ourselves individually as beaten, hungry, hurting, lost, at the side of the road. We are called to reach parts of ourselves that are strange and damaged and needy and to receive love from people we have no reason to trust. And only then in turn being called to the second part, to go and do the same, knowing it will change us.”

This morning I ask you to listen for where God is calling you to simply love God and love your neighbor. Take a moment and reflect on the ways that Christ has come to you when you were suffering. God’s compassion for us flows through our hearts and changes us. Walls that are human made cannot tame God’s radical love meant to bridge the divides.

We can leave this morning numbed by the events of this week, or we can allow the words of scripture to permeate our hearts and empower us. What will change if you live with the

intention of crossing boundaries to make friends in low places?

Reaching out is not only a matter of ethics but a way of drawing closer to God. As we see Christ in “the other” our hearts are blessed by living an eternal life in the here and now. Amen.