
The Rule of Mercy

Luke 10:25-37

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on July 14, 2013 by the Rev. Luke Powery

Mrs. Harrison, my 3rd grade teacher at Parkway Elementary School, loved bean soup. She loved to serve it to the class, especially when some were misbehaving. Whoever was misbehaving, she would take to the bathroom in the class to serve her bean soup. No one wanted Mrs. Harrison's bean soup! Everyone was afraid of it (and her). What she called "bean soup" was not food; it was the bean pod that she would use to spank naughty students on the legs. She would not get away with this today but back in the day, she even served bean soup to me and I have lived to tell the story. My parents don't even know what I'm telling you. One day I was talking when I shouldn't have been and Mrs. Harrison with her "wicked witch of the west" voice, called me over to give me some bean soup. I was scared. She opened the bathroom door and led me inside and then closed the door behind me. She asked, "Are you ready for some bean soup?" I was frightened and said, "No." She said, "Well, here goes." She lifted her hand with that bean pod high in the air. As she swung quickly down and came close to my legs, she made contact with my legs with just a few little taps. Her justice was seasoned with mercy. A lesson on mercy is exactly what the lawyer in Luke learns.

The lawyer is on a roll at the beginning. He asks the first question—what must I do to inherit eternal life? And when he finally answers—"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all our strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself" —Jesus tells him what he wants to hear and probably what he thought he was going to hear—"You have given the right answer." The teacher of the law of Moses, the lawyer, was right again. He knows what is written in the law. He's on a roll. He tested Jesus, the Teacher, and he won, so he thought. The right answer was perceived to be the source of his redemption, his pathway to inheriting eternal life, the life of the kingdom. But "having right answers does not mean one knows God"(Fred Craddock).

One may know about God and not know God. One may study theology 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and not know the One whom theology is about. One may name all the books of the Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy...) and still not know the God of the Bible. You can have right doctrinal formulations and the right liturgical protocol and be captivated by one's own religious erudition and still be heading down the wrong path. It is possible to create a three-point sermon but still miss the point. Having all the right answers does not necessarily translate into right living. Jesus does not say to the lawyer "Great answer. You're my top student!" He says, "Do this and you will live."

Possessing the right answer does not mean that one will live. Why is it that people sometimes feel the need to caution preachers, even this one, not to preach hellfire and brimstone? What are the underlying perceptions of preachers and the Church that would make this one of the first things someone might say? Of course, (and as a Baptist, I can say this) there are brutal Baptist preachers who have bully pulpits. We've seen that recently in the news. Is it that we are more known for our hate than our love? Is it that we sit in the seat of orthodoxy casting judgment on others because we are right and have an answer to every question in life? The right answers as God's right hand disciples? Are we more known for following what is written in the law than the spirit of the law, following the rule of law rather than other rules of discipleship, like the rule of love and mercy? What rule governs your lives?

In 6th century Rome, St. Benedict wrote his Rule (what we call 'The Rule of St. Benedict') primarily for monks who would work and live together. He desired to establish an ordered way of life, "a school for the Lord's service" that would cultivate certain virtues in individuals and a community. It was a school of

thought that taught humility, “that every exaltation is a kind of pride....that we descend by exaltation and ascend by humility.” In other words, humble pie in the Christian life may be good for your spiritual diet.

Having all the right answers does not mean we have it all right. Religious hubris does not help us to recognize the ways in which we may have it wrong. “You have given the right answer” does not negate the future possibility and inevitability of some wrong answers or even a wrong question.

The lawyer was on a roll after giving the right answer so he figures he can test Jesus again and ask another question. “Who is my neighbor?” That question sparks Jesus to tell the story known as the “Good Samaritan” though Luke never calls the Samaritan “good.” And to the Jewish lawyer, Jesus’ use of the Samaritan in this story was probably not viewed as a good thing either. The Samaritans were aliens, foreigners, far from home (9:52). They were descendants of a mixed population occupying the land following the conquest of Assyria in 722 BCE. They opposed rebuilding the temple and Jerusalem (Ezra 4:2-5; Neh 2:19) and constructed their own place of worship on Mount Gerizim. They were viewed as ceremonially unclean, socially outcast, and religiously heretics—a triple threat. So when Jesus lifts up the Samaritan as the moral example, not the religious professionals, I can hear “Houston, we have a problem.”

It is not the priest, nor the Levite, both religious figures, who are commended for their action but it is the Samaritan. When he sees the stripped and beaten man half dead on the road, he’s moved with pity, bandages his wounds, pours oil and wine on them, puts him on his own animal, brings him to an inn and takes care of him. The supposed outsider and enemy does the insider’s job. The non-religious, or at least the non-Christian, the so-called “nones” of today may somehow teach us what it means to follow Christ even when they themselves are not explicit Christian disciples. The reaction of the priest and Levite were not commendable but not without reason; a body on the road could have been a plant by robbers to trap travelers or contact with a corpse would defile the priest and Levite and disqualify them from temple responsibilities. “When they saw the victim, theirs was a choice between duty and duty”(Craddock). What is most shocking here, however, is that it is the person that would be deemed the most opposite of the priest and Levite who is the exemplar. In fact, Jesus suggests that the Samaritan is the neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers; the lawyer actually answers his own question (Who is my neighbor?) when he answers Jesus, “the one who showed mercy.” The lawyer was on a roll up to this point.

We learn that for the lawyer the Samaritan is his neighbor. “Who is my neighbor?” The story reveals that the Samaritan is the neighbor. This one whose people had a hostile relationship with the Jewish people of the day. The one on the farthest extreme of difference—religiously, socially, ethnically, politically—was his neighbor. *The other* is my neighbor. I’m coming to a better understanding of this recently since we moved. Our next-door neighbors are huge UNC fans. Who is my neighbor literally? Tarheel blue. The *other* is my neighbor.

At the same time, “who is my neighbor?” may not be the right question. That question implies selectivity about who should be loved and shown mercy. It suggests that some may be in and some may be out. Some may be “*my* neighbor” and others could just be yours.

Jesus’ story reveals that the question should not necessarily be “who is my neighbor?” but “whose neighbor am I?”

“Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor?” “The one who showed him mercy.” A neighbor is not the one who receives but the one who gives, the one who shows mercy and follows that rule. Jesus’ question changes the meaning of neighbor to be more active than passive. Don’t be so concerned about who your neighbor might be but whether you are acting like a neighbor. Not “who is my neighbor?” but “am I neighbor?” Do I show mercy? It is self-interrogation. Am I prone to pass by on the other side or do I bandage the wounds of those have been left on the road to die? There is a neighbor within which puts love your neighbor as yourself into perspective because you are a neighbor.

Acting as a neighbor is not about doing good so you can build your cv with community service or boasting about good works or wearing a badge of holy honor. It is about showing mercy to someone who has been stripped of their human dignity, beaten down so much that they are almost dead, adding to the number of the victims of violence. It is about doing a ministry of mercy that heals and bandages the wounds of hurt. It is about being moral. Moral mercy.

A lot has been in the news about Moral Mondays in Raleigh. Whatever your take is on it, let me be clear that every day is a moral day, not just Mondays, because every day is a day to show mercy, to choose mercy over judgment, to choose mercy over hate, to adhere to the rule of mercy and oppose what hip hop culture calls “hateration.” Beyond political partisanship, the call to be a neighbor means in the words of today’s Psalm—to “give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.” In other words, am I a neighbor to the one beaten on the road, moved by pity, and willing to show mercy or will I pass by on my way to another church potluck? God desires mercy rather than sacrifice (Hosea 6:6).

Mother Teresa was known as an angel of mercy. She gave her life for the poor, the sick, and the hungry of Calcutta, India. She began with an open-air school for homeless children and as funds came in she expanded her work to create her order known as “The Missionaries of Charity” which focused on loving and caring for those nobody wanted to care for. She said her focus was “to help the poor and to better their lot.” She created Shishu Bhavan, a home for babies whom parents couldn’t or wouldn’t care for. She started a colony for lepers, Shanti Nagar, where lepers could build homes and work on their fields. She created Nirmal Hriday, a home for the dying, and on the very first day for that home, she picked up a woman who was literally half-eaten by rats and ants and carried her to this home. Mother Teresa understood that one cannot inherit the life of the kingdom, eternal life, and reject the command to love.

She also understood that all of us at some time or another are in need of what Toni Morrison calls “a mercy.” We confess our need of mercy every week—Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy. We say it three times because once is not enough. Even the question “who is my neighbor?” and the response which points to an active neighbor may show us that we, in fact, are the ones in need. If the neighbor is the one who shows mercy, asking “who is my neighbor?” means that our neighbor is the one who provides for our need and cares for us and shows us mercy. I know we want to be self-sufficient and do not want to show our vulnerability or need of help. I know we want to demonstrate our rugged individualism and pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. We are successful lettered people! But I also know that at times we may be the ones robbed on the road in need of assistance, in need of mercy, in need of someone to be a neighbor to us today and who that neighbor turns out to be may shock us into seeing the gospel; our neighbor could be a Samaritan or especially those who are not “like us.” Professor David Lose comments, “perhaps the only way we can see ourselves as the Samaritan – the one called to give help and healing to those in need – is first to recognize how often we have been the traveler left for dead. Once you’ve been encountered by radical grace and love . . . it’s hard to look at anything ... or anyone ... quite the same.”

In other words, you are not just the neighbor, but you have been “neighborized,” the recipient of mercy. Just as the Samaritan helped a victim of violence on a middle eastern street, these days, we need a double portion of mercy in the midst of waves of perpetual violence.

Recently, during a soccer game in Brazil, a referee gave a player a red card, the highest penalty that results in being expelled from the game. The player wasn’t happy so he argued with the referee to such an extent that the referee fatally stabbed the player. Then the family of that player stoned the referee to death and dismembered him. “Mercy, mercy me/Ah things ain’t what they used to be.” Lord have mercy! We live in a world of great misery that sorely needs God’s mercy. The mercy of God revealed in and through our Neighbor, Jesus Christ.

When we find ourselves lying in the road half dead, Jesus, the divine Samaritan is moved with pity for us. He won't pass by but stop by. He shows us mercy when no one else will. And what he looks like may surprise us because he is *other*. "He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account. Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed" (Isaiah 53). God's mercy is not cheap. It cost God's Son his life to be our Neighbor. That's what it took to bandage and heal our wounds. It took the "wideness of God's mercy like the wideness of the sea." It took the rule of mercy, not judgment, to save you and me. His mercy seasoned his justice (cf. William Shakespeare "The Quality of Mercy") so that we might live to "go and do likewise" and extend the same mercy to others that has been extended to us. The rule of mercy not only keeps us neighborly but it keeps us human, close to the ground like the naked and robbed man on the road as a reminder of where we have come from and to where we will go. Lord have mercy on all of us today. Amen.