

“Here Again for the First Time” – Luke 10:25-37 (July 10, 2016)
Ned Allyn Parker

“How can I say that I love the Lord whom I never ever seen before, but forget to say that I love the one whom I walk beside each and every day?”

Well, that’s the question, isn’t it?

And if God is love, then where is God today?

“How can I say that I love the Lord whom I never ever seen before, but forget to say that I love the one whom I walk beside each and every day?”

We are called to be Samaritans – to love our neighbor... But not only that, I wonder if we honor the story even more when we recognize ourselves in *all* of the characters in this parable – by approaching it with fresh eyes every time we encounter it. This exercise increases our capacity for empathy, and equipped with empathy maybe our ability to show that mercy of the Samaritan also increases.

Especially after a week like this one.

In Psalm 6, the psalmist sings: “My heart is in anguish. How long, O Lord? How long?”

Are your hearts in anguish today? Did you wake up this morning and ask, “How long, O Lord? How long?”

“My heart is in anguish today. How long, O Lord? How long? I am worn out from my groaning.”

I am worn out from my groaning.

My friend Cody, who’s the pastor at Old Cambridge Baptist Church next to Harvard University expressed difficulty with this internal monologue he had on Thursday. Old Cambridge has a large Black Lives Matter sign that sits on their property facing Harvard square. Cody tries to print the names of victims of violence in his bulletin for Sunday services so people remember

their names and can hold the families in their prayers. They had to print the bulletins early this week because their administrator was going on vacation. Cody sat down to add Alton Sterling and Philando Castile – two black men killed by police this week – but he later relays the following through a Facebook update: “Yesterday, I had an internal debate over whether to print the names of those unjustly killed this week or to just speak them aloud in the service. I had to figure, ‘No, let's not print [the names yet], it's only Thursday.’” What is the world coming to, he wondered, if his reaction is “It’s only Thursday; there will surely be more to come”?

Friday morning he woke up to recognize how prophetic his reticence to print the names had been.

“My heart is in anguish today. How long, O Lord? How long?”

Today, we are given the parable of the Good Samaritan. Now, if you grew up in a church that uses the lectionary, some of you have heard twenty or more sermons about this story – and that doesn’t include all of the illustrations that point to it, or reflections that allude to it. It doesn’t include the references to it in popular culture, or the organizations named after it. The hospital that I taught ESL classes at in the Dominican Republic was called the “Good Samaritan Haitian Missionary Baptist Hospital.”

A quick Google search of “Good Samaritan in the Pacific Northwest” yields results like “Samaritan’s Purse,” “Good Samaritan Hospital,” and “Samaritan Center of the Puget Sound.”

The story is called the crux or pinnacle of the New Testament; we are surrounded by allusions to it. Our faith tradition orients attempts to itself around the meaning of this story – especially when making sense of the resurrection gets too complicated.

And still we try to make it fresh, to breathe new life into it. When we're hearing it again, we try to hear it as if for the first time. This week, perhaps you'll never hear it again the same after listening to Patricia and Michelle join forces for that piece of music.

The tale is timeless. Different actors take on the roles of the same old characters. The same is true in our national events as much as it's true in our approach to the Bible.

When I searched Google News for the heading "Good Samaritan" on Friday afternoon, the top hit was a story about a group of black folks and white folks who surrounded a baby stroller on Thursday night and used their own bodies as shields as a hail of sniper bullets landed around them.

They used their own bodies as shields while around them eleven police officers were shot and five were killed.

"My heart is in anguish today. How long, O Lord? How long?"

|| *Selah* ||

Mercy! I say mercy. In exhaustion and fear – in anger that I have friends with their backs against the wall – I say MERCY.

Christ, have mercy on us. Have mercy. Christ have mercy on us when we *fail* to have mercy on each other. More importantly: Christ have mercy on us so that through that mercy we finally finally finally *learn* to have mercy on each other. Christ, have mercy.

Because honestly, if we've heard twenty or thirty sermons on this parable, but the world continues to look the way it does, then we haven't finished learning from it. We don't just preach the same sermon, we preach it new again for the first time so that somehow this message might sink in: "To love God with all our heart, and all our soul, and all of our strength and to love our neighbor as our very self...."

So, mercy! I cry mercy. You should, too.

Mercy.

Have mercy on us; have mercy on each other.

Because here we are again. In so many ways: here we are again, asking: “How long, O Lord? How long?”

We ask for mercy – we ask for the Samaritan’s mercy.

Because this cycle of violence is merciless... mercy-less. It is action and reaction. No reflection. No reconciliation. We are not loving God with all our heart, soul, or strength – and we are certainly not loving our neighbors as ourselves.

“My heart is in anguish today...”

And how long... “how [long], O Lord, can I say that I love you whom I never ever seen before, but forget to say that I love the one whom I walk beside each and every day?”

That’s the question, isn’t it?

We need to do some remembering as a nation so we can shed a little light on the present state of things. We need to learn from those times we were the priest or we were the Levite and recognize the mistake we made when we shunned or ignored our neighbor...

Maybe, just maybe, we need to look back and remember those times we have even been the robbers on that road to Jericho.

|| *Selah* ||

As some of you know, I recently joined our friends from Japanese Baptist Church on a pilgrimage to Minidoka – one of the Internment Camps used to imprison Japanese Americans from 1942-1945. During a presentation leading up to our visit to Minidoka, a speaker reflected with the following words: “Internment of Japanese Americans teaches us too much about

ourselves. It teaches us so much that we can't possibly learn its very deepest implications. I believe the lesson should have been simple. But look around us..."

He talked about mass incarceration – particularly incarceration of young African American men.

He talked about the genocide, and the [ongoing] forced relocation of Native Americans.

He talked about ongoing threats made toward Muslims and LGBTQ persons, and Latinos and Latinas.

His messages, like many we received on the pilgrimage, were sobering reminders of our present reality where sometimes our only real progress comes in the form of more efficient and more accessible tools to kill. Our only real progress comes from longer taller walls.

|| *Selah* ||

One person on facebook recently posted (and I'm paraphrasing): "Forget building a taller wall; America should build a giant mirror and take a long hard look at itself." ... Because when we put our present reality against the backdrop of historical atrocities, it becomes clear we're still struggling to learn.

Being progressive is a misnomer unless it includes actual progress.

I guess, in a way, Minidoka became that mirror for me – it became a lens through which to view where we are right now...

Maybe even with a little hope.

On the pilgrimage there were five or six families that had multiple generations in attendance. I had the great honor of accompanying a mother and her daughter on the tour. The mother lived at the camp from the age of 14 until she was 17. And as we walked around I heard

the daughter say again and again in different ways, “You know I didn’t know you had been imprisoned until you invited my children and me on this trip. I just didn’t know.”

At one point we stopped at one of the barracks and went inside. We stood in a room maybe twice the size of the organ pit. Slowly the mother pointed around the room and said, “Well, my two brothers slept in that corner. My parents slept there. Two of my sisters slept here...” By the end of her reminiscence she had counted off nine different people who shared that single space as their living quarters for three years.

Her daughter’s eyes widened with the name of every family member. She became more and more transfixed on her mother as she shared story after story. She was seeing her own mother – the mother she had known her entire life – as if for the first time.

You could see understanding dawn on her face. You could see her soften as the stories unfolded. You could see her act more gently toward her mother as she described every experience in detail.

We all watched a certain kind of mercy unfold before our very eyes. It was as if we were watching a slow silent forgiveness unfold – forgiveness for years of silence.

Maybe, just maybe, if we listened to each other with merciful ears, our hearts would be softened, too. Maybe if we *tried to understand* each other, our hearts would be softened too.

Maybe, just maybe, in that softening we might find God’s mercy and we might find our own capacity for mercy.

As a straight, white, cis-gendered, Christian man standing against the backdrop of a cycle of violence in this nation, I admit that I don’t know what it’s like to be the injured traveller left in the ditch. I have to come to terms with the times I’ve been the Levite, the priest, and – yes – one of the robbers. As a straight, white, cis-gendered, Christian man, when I am able to show myself

mercy, the story of the Good Samaritan can be the story of a good ally. It shows the power of standing up and giving aid – even and especially when a person is somehow different than me.

Further, I recognize that the story ends with “Go and do...” It doesn’t end with “Go and consider,” or “Go and discern,” or even “Go and pray.”

Go and *do*. Be active.

As the pilgrimage to Minidoka came to a close, we were invited to attach paper cranes to a length of barbed wire – some of them are pictured on the front of your bulletin this morning.

As I attached my own crane, I remembered something that Namira Islam (our plenary speaker) shared with us.

She said, “In Islam we have a saying: ‘Trust in God AND tie your camel.’”

It is a reminder to hold fast to faith, AND do what you need to do to take care of yourself and your neighbor – in other words: to be good Samaritans.

We profess our faith AND we call ourselves to action.

We remind ourselves that we can’t simply have faith that our past atrocities will never be committed again. The state of race relations, the state of gender equality, the state of religious identity all identify our need to learn from what has come before. We must remember Jesus’ encouragement to “Go and do,” and so we need to DO our part for the sake of justice, for the sake of loved ones, AND for the sake of the stranger.

We’ve all been on the road to Jericho. We’ve all played different roles in the story. The next time we find ourselves on that road, we need to ask ourselves who we’ll be.

Jesus asked, “Which of the three was a neighbor to the person who fell into the hands of robbers?” He responded: “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said, “Go and DO likewise...”

The one who had mercy was the neighbor.

Jesus says, “Go and do likewise...” And if you hear Jesus’ voice encouraging you to have mercy, please, I beg you: do not harden your hearts.