

“Membership as Ministry”
A Sermon by Rev. Victoria ByRoe
Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Sunday, July 11, 2010
Scripture: Luke 10:25-37

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: *Descend among us, move in our midst, startle us, teach us, reveal to us your will for our lives. Our Lord and our God, we call upon you to abide with us as we gather in your name. Amen.*

As those of you who were here last week are aware, this week is the second week in our sermon series focusing on the topic of church membership. Last week we talked about some of the basic beliefs and principals of the Presbyterian faith. We talked, too, about the idea that each of the following weeks in July we would look more closely at some of those beliefs and how they affect our lives together and the mission of the church to which we belong.

As I was talking to some friends the other night, I was asked what our text for today would be. When they learned that we would be talking about “The Good Samaritan”, one of the comments was the hope that some of the children who attended Vacation Bible School a couple of weeks ago would be here. Evidently, that was one of the stories which was acted out in the story time portion of their days.

When I heard that remark, it reminded me of something a Sunday School Teacher once said. She, too, had been telling her class the story of the Good Samaritan. She told how the man was beaten, robbed and left for dead. She described the situation in vivid detail so her students would catch the drama. Then she asked the class, “If you saw a person lying on the roadside all wounded and bleeding, what would you do?”

A thoughtful little girl broke the hushed silence, “I think I’d throw up,” she said.

While this was a little girl who was

honest about what her response might have been, don’t you think that there are many adults who would have the same response? And even if we don’t admit to wanting to throw up, I think we would admit to wanting to walk away.

According to Luke’s gospel, once upon a time a businessman from Samaria went up to Jerusalem, and after finishing his business there, decided to head home down the dark, dangerous, winding road from Jerusalem to Jericho, even though anyone with half a brain knew better than to travel this road alone. But the man wanted to get home to his wife and kids, and besides, he had an important conference call he needed to make the next morning, so he decided to take his chances.

As he walked along the road, probably looking nervously left and right, and listening for any odd sounds, he was jumped by a bunch of thugs, and they beat him nearly to death. The thugs took off with his clothes, and whatever else he had of value, and left him on the rocky edge of the road to die.

Imagine him lying there, in the near-dark and growing cold. One eye is battered and swollen shut, there’s the salt and metallic taste of blood in his mouth where he can feel some of his teeth are broken, his ribs – almost certainly broken too – are screaming with sharp, tearing pain, and it’s getting harder and harder to breath. He almost surely is going to die, and to die soon.

Then he hears footsteps. His first reaction is terror – what if the thugs have come back to finish him off? Then, through his slitted, swollen eye, he makes out the robes and insignia of – of all people – a priest of the Temple! He’s a minister, a pastor, one of God’s designated servants. Help is here! The injured man groans with relief, and with pain, knowing this priest will surely help him.

Imagine his dismay when instead of stopping and helping, this man of God takes one look at him, says, “hey, you’re not a member of

my congregation” – and crosses over to the other side of the street, and keeps right on walking.

Some time later, the injured man drifts in and out of consciousness, so he’s not sure exactly how long it is, he hears more footsteps. Again, he’s afraid – but again, his hopes are raised. He can see by this man’s robes and staff that he is a Levite.

Now we don’t have a direct parallel for Levites in today’s Christian church, but in Jesus’ time they were as important – and perhaps more important – than the Temple priests. In addition to performing many of the priestly duties, the Levites were in charge of music for all worship services, they alone were permitted to carry the Ark of the Covenant, The Temple’s holiest object, they were the Sunday School teachers for all adults, and they administered the very complicated law. They were kind of a combination choir director, keyboard and strings player, Deacon, liturgist, religious educator, attorney, judge, and jury, all at the same time!

Seeing the Levite approaching, the injured, agonized man must have thought, “well this one will certainly help – he above all others knows the religious obligation to give help to those in need. He has to help me.”

But the Levite, as soon as he saw the injured man lying there groaning, checked his Palm Pilot and saw that he was late for an important meeting with the chair of the Property committee. So he walked across the road, turned his head away, and kept right on going.

By now the injured man knows that he is dying and is ready to give up, fading in and out of consciousness when he hears a third set of footsteps. Squinting his one good eye open, he can just see in the near-darkness that the man is wearing the clothing of a Samaritan.

The injured man, who is Jewish, is fully aware of the hatred that exists between the Samaritans and the Jews. (Imagine, if you will, that this is taking place in a back alley in

Baghdad today, and the injured man is an Iraqi insurgent and the approaching man is a U.S. soldier.) Even more terrified than before, the injured man turns his head away and closes his eyes and stifles his groans, hoping that the Samaritan won't see him because if he does, the most likely thing for him to do is to finish the job the others had started.

But he hears the traveler's footsteps getting closer. He hears the creak of leather as a waterskin is unfastened. He hears the pop of the man's knees as he kneels down in the rocks next to him. He is astonished when he feels the cool water poured through his broken and bleeding lips, and splashed gently on the cuts on his face. He is more astonished still when the man tears strips of cloth from his own clothing, and binds up his wounds, and painstakingly lifts him on to the back of his donkey, and takes him to a place of shelter.

By the time Jesus finishes the story, we can imagine the crowd practically in an uproar but he ignores their calls of "that can't be right...a Samaritan can't be the hero!" Then Jesus turns to the lawyer with his own question: "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?"

Without pausing for a second, the lawyer says, "the one who showed him mercy, of course." To which Jesus says to him and to us, "Go and do likewise."

You know, we are very good at justifying our ways of seeing things, of rationalizing our faith and making sure that we adjust the gospel to our own level of comfort. However, there is something to the gospel of Jesus that keeps escaping our attempts to make it possible. The gospel is impossible to live. After all, we can't all live like Francis of Assisi or Mother Theresa, right? And, if you ask me, I would say that the lawyer in our story this morning, a man like any of us really, really

wants to know what is required of him – just exactly who is his neighbor? He is hoping to learn what the extent of responsibility of his care is. When could he quit loving, he wanted to know. The answer he probably wanted was that he only had to love the members of his synagogue or the members of the Jerusalem Bar.

But...that's not what Jesus said. Instead, in his telling of the Good Samaritan story, Jesus' answer to him was, "Look, friend, you are asking the wrong question. The real question is not 'who is your neighbor'. The real question is who are you?"

I told you last week that really the only thing you have to say or do to be a member of a Presbyterian church is that you believe that Jesus Christ is your Lord and Savior. And that is true. I also told you, though, you will begin to want to live differently. After all, the Christian faith is to be lived – not memorized.

As we consider this morning that membership is ministry, I invite you to turn your bulletins to the very back page. Do you see who the ministers of the church are? You – and what Jesus is telling the man our story today, he is telling you, as well. Being a child of God, making a public affirmation of your faith by becoming a member of this church or any church means that you will respond with compassion to human suffering wherever you find it. Mercy – mercy for another human being is not qualified by race, status, religion or any other barrier that society might erect. "It doesn't make any difference who he is", Jesus says. "It's not who he is; it's who you are. If we are people within whom the love God dwells then we will respond with compassion to those whom we meet on the roadside of life. May it be so for you and for me. Amen.

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