



**Proper 15, Year C – July 11, 2010**  
Luke 10:25-37

**A Homily preached by the Rev'd James Popham**

First, a news flash. On July 6, 2010, I sent a letter to the District of Columbia Bar – no, not bar, as in “happy hour,” but as in the agency that accredits lawyers – I sent them a letter asking that they change my status from “active” to “inactive.” This reduced my annual dues by \$100 and also allows me to pretend that I am no longer a lawyer. In light of the gospel reading today, that’s good news. Though I must say that the “lawyer” who asked Jesus the questions was not much of a lawyer. He violated several rules that any trial lawyer knows all too well. Indeed, most of us learned the hard way: Never ask a question of a witness that you do not already know what the answer will be and never ask too many questions. And in reality, in the context of this story, this young lawyer was not a lawyer like we think of lawyers today. He was an expert on religious law, as, indeed, his questions suggest. So, you see, the story is “not about me.”

But that’s the good news, at least, for me. The bad news for me is that in the story Jesus told, the first person to pass by the injured robbery victim on the road to Jericho was a priest. He even went to the other side of the road. What can I say? Now I would love to tell you that I would never have passed a person in need on the side of the road. But more realistically, I would be launching into a litany of excuses for NOT stopping to help a fellow motorist in need.

- She may be a 4 foot 10 slight, but pregnant woman staring worriedly at a flat tire, but surely she has a cell phone – doesn’t everybody? – and already has called her husband or brother or cousin or the AMA.
- I left my jumper cables in the other car, so what help could I be anyway.
- Surely a trucker will stop and lend assistance; they always do. Well, they always did in the 50s and 60s.
- Why should I help this idiot who ran out of gas anyway?
- If I stop I’ll be late for church.

You get the idea.

Now I am sure I would stop now if someone by the side of the road needed spiritual care. So often we come across hitch hikers holding up a scratchy cardboard sign, reading, “Please, stop and hear my confession.”

And I only crossed to the other side of the street to avoid talking to my favorite homeless person on the streets of Washington, D.C. – Robert John – who gave me Christmas cards, discussed movies we had both seen, and commented on conditions in “the firmament” unquote – I only avoided him when I was in a hurry. After all, it was easier to slip him a quick twenty every week or so than to stop and talk to him as another human being – to be his neighbour.

And, of course, that is an important point of the story of the good Samaritan: We are to be good neighbours. And to be a good neighbour means loving our neighbours as we love ourselves and understanding, too, that no one is not our neighbour.

Now the problem with this, as the lawyer recognized, is that it speaks in broad generalities. So he asked the next question, and the answer indicates that having

mercy is a neighbourly act of love. And in the sense Luke uses the word mercy, the better understanding would be compassion. To love is to be compassionate.

So what we come away with is the notion that we are to show compassion – to love – everyone. Why do I think you knew that before you came for pancakes and church this morning? Most of us who have hung around any Christian church or denomination likely figured this part out some time ago. Indeed, how many times have you heard this parable of the Good Samaritan.

What else can we extract from this familiar story than loving everyone and not passing stranded motorists on the highway?

Let me make a couple of quick suggestions.

First, never hesitate to ask questions. Remember, the lawyer gained a better understanding of what God expected of him – and of all of us – by courageously asking a question. We are blessed in the Anglican church with a tradition of intellectual freedom. We welcome questions. And rather than accept pat answers, we seek knowledge and insights that will enable us to come to informed judgments about precisely how we are to go about loving our neighbours. We engage in formative spiritual disciplines and come to church for transformative liturgies that connect us with God in all God's wisdom and power. And we do not see conflict as inherently bad, but as a means of mulling and testing and discerning what God intends.

Second, none of us is without need of God's forgiveness. Before the good Samaritan came to the rescue, a priest and a Levite – a member of the priestly caste – showed no compassion, no love for the victim by the side of the road. Even the supposedly holy fall well short of perfection and righteousness and, therefore, need God's grace and forgiveness no less than the bandits who robbed the traveler and left him for dead. Priest, Levite, Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy – butcher, baker, candlestick-maker, even lawyers. We all fail as neighbours at times, and we all must seek God's forgiveness.

Third, we must never be surprised at the goodness and righteousness and generosity of those who do not look like us or think like us or believe like us or come to church every Sunday like us –well, some of us. We do not have a monopoly on God's love, Christ's reconciliation of God and creation, or the constancy of the Holy Spirit. Good neighbours come in all shapes and sizes, all colours and complexions, all religions and even none, all nationalities, even Samaritans.

Fourth, opportunities to be a good neighbour can come at unexpected times and unexpected ways. Sometimes, I think, God even places someone in our path just so we can be a good neighbour, to show them love and compassion, even to rescue them from their distress. So keep your eyes and ears and hearts open. You never know when you, too, may have the opportunity to be a good Samaritan.

Amen.