

Proper 10C  
Pentecost 7

July 11, 2010

Baptism of Ezekiel Brayden Woodin-Stockert

Amos 7.7-17  
Ps 82  
Colossians 1.1-14  
Luke 10.25-37

Many of you are at least remotely familiar with the social networking site called Facebook. I think it started years ago for college students to be connected with their peers in response to the very popular “My Space” which had the reputation of being for high school age. But over the past 10 years or so Facebook has become something beyond anyone’s expectations. Lots of us at St. Andrew’s [and St. Swithin’s] have Facebook pages. Some of us aren’t college age, either! I don’t spend a lot of time on it, but it is fun. It’s enabling my sister to stay in touch with her Marine Corps son who is stationed in Afghanistan. It would have enabled us to stay in touch with Laura during her time away except for the small detail of her being in China which has blocked Facebook!

Anyway, this week I received a couple “invitations” to attend “Good Samaritan Sunday” at my local church. I didn’t respond, although I issued my own invitations for Easter and Pentecost. I thought – we’re doing a baptism today, what if I don’t preach on the Good Samaritan? What if it’s something else? And why is it Good Samaritan Sunday anyway? Will there be a Prodigal Son Sunday? Plumb line Sunday? A Brood of Vipers Sunday? Personally, I’m much more in favor of Ice Cream Sundae Sunday. ☺ [coffee hour today!]

I am guessing that it’s “Good Samaritan Sunday” because we can see ourselves as the good Samaritan and go away from this parable feeling good and that’s what we like; it’s a pretty comfortable place to be. Kate Huey wrote that this seems to be a nice story with a nice moral; if you see someone in the ditch, go and help them. It doesn’t make our stomach churn or offend our sensibilities. Surely we would do the same as the Samaritan, right? We’d never be like that priest or Levite and cross on the other side.

When I looked back in my sermon file I realize I’ve never preached on this parable. Six years ago I was in Calgary, Alberta, doing hospital chaplaincy and not preaching. Three years ago I was on vacation and the congregation had Morning Prayer without me. So I’m in new territory this week.

But not really. Five weeks ago we had a gospel reading from Luke about Jesus restoring a widow’s son to life; the story of the procession of death meeting the procession of life. It was a story of Jesus’ deep and generous compassion. The Greek word Luke chose for compassion was *splanchnizomai* (σπλαγχνιζομαι), and he used it only two other times in his gospel. Once when the Samaritan sees the stripped and beaten man (our translation says he was “moved with pity”) and when the prodigal father sees his lost son for the first time down the road. This is intense inner emotion and sympathy which accompanies mercy.

The parable of the “good” Samaritan (implying all the rest are “bad”) is a story of Jesus’ compassion and mercy. It doesn’t turn out exactly like the lawyer imagines that it would when he begins by asking Jesus what is needed to inherit eternal life. He responded with the “correct” answer when Jesus returned the question to him: Love God and your neighbor as yourself.

He might have quit while he was ahead. After all, Jesus said, “You have given the right answer; do this and you will live.” But the lawyer pressed: Who is my neighbor? That’s a different story. So Jesus gave him a story; probably not a real life episode; but an illustration of what it means to BE a neighbor. A plumb line against which we might measure ourselves to see how far off God’s center we are. Or how near.

This lawyer really wanted to know how big he needed to draw the circle round him. The question was to limit whom he has to love; he wants to know who he doesn’t have to be a neighbor to. “Come on Jesus, give me some parameters. Who would it be okay NOT to love? After all, I’m only human... How big does the circle have to be?” Jesus didn’t respond with a law or a definition. Laws, after all, can spell things out, list them, forbid them, require them, but stories get to the heart of things, to the heart of us, to that place of feeling and gut reaction.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus tells him a story of what it takes to BE a neighbor: show mercy. Well, rats. If there is no real definition of neighbor – who is and who isn’t – then we are left with what it means to BE one to whomever needs one. That’s harder. It will expand even Mr. Rogers’ neighborhood. It reminds me of when the disciples questioned Jesus: “How many times must we forgive? Seven times? How about seventy times?” No, seven times seventy, which essentially means there are no limits to Jesus’ compassion and mercy. They will not be bounded by definition and exclusion.

Neighborhood in this context isn’t any easier to define. Lane Denson is someone I often quote; he’s a retired Episcopal priest in Nashville and he has pointed out that it’s only too easy to think of a neighborhood more as a place than as a relationship, more realty than reality. I have found that to be true when telling this story in Godly Play to the children. The response to wondering, “Who is my neighbor?” invariably hangs up on the idea of local neighborhood and geography; just like it can for us. Jesus calls us to attend to what it means to be a neighbor rather than to decide who is ours and who isn’t. Denson wonders if in our better moments we might even call neighborhood an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace – a sacrament; a means through which we experience God and find our center.

The plumb line that Amos sees directs us to our center. That’s the point of a plumb line; it lines you up with the center of the earth. It aligns us with God and Jesus who is showing us what divine love is like. The dreaded, hated, despised enemy from Samaria turned out to be the neighbor. For us now the Samaritan might be an Iraqi terrorist or Al Qaeda; Jew or Muslim; murderer or rapist. Now the stomachs are churning, continues Huey, and sensibilities are being offended.

Good, Bible believing, professional theologians have passed by this man. The only one who stopped was the despised Samaritan and we may be insulted at having him be the one we are supposed to emulate. But he became judgment for us. A plumb line is being held up beside us,

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<sup>1</sup> reference/attribution missing from my original – my apologies... The words here are borrowed and appreciated.

blogged William Willimon. Go and do as the Samaritan; someone without our theological commitment demonstrates that commitment better than we. Jesus' answer calls us to mercy.

Mercy is at the heart of Christian prayer. The response to our intercessory prayers is often: Lord, have mercy. The ancient Jesus prayer is: Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner. It dates back to at least the 5<sup>th</sup> century; probably from the desert fathers in Egypt. Perhaps this is really the parable of the merciful Samaritan.

*Sojourners* magazine online wrote this week that mercy is different from charity. Mercy brings together generosity, grace, and love. It is not simply forgiving or being kind to a person to whom you have no obligation or feel morally superior. Mercy calls us to follow Amos' plumb line down into the depths of our own soul, a place that is not hidden from God, but a place that God can illuminate.

The Greek word for mercy, *ελεος*/eleos, suggests blessing and unwarranted compassion as well as leniency. It has made it into our legal jargon; appealing to a judge or jury for mercy. Peter Woods ruminated this week that law and [mercy] or compassion do not sit easily together. Reflecting on his thirty years of ministry, he recognized that each time he kept the rules of the church with regard to who may or may not be baptized, confirmed, married or buried in the Church, some has been hurt or excluded. There are times when the law is the thief; stealing compassion/*σπλανχνιζομαι*, mercy/*ελεος*, or love.

If we cannot define our neighbor, but only seek to BE a neighbor, how we express that in our lives will be a testament to our commitment to Jesus. The demand of that commandment to show compassion and mercy knows no limit. We are about to administer the sacrament of Holy Baptism to Ezekiel Brayden and we are ALL going to make promises to him that we will be examples of Christian living and will do all we can to help him grow into the person that God has created him to be. It's our responsibility to him to show him what it is to be a neighbor and what it means to "Go and do likewise."

Gail Wheatley+