

To Live with Compassion

A sermon by Rev. Joe Hoffman
July 15, 2007
(as typed out from the audio tape)

When I come in the sanctuary I remember that this was somebody else's sanctuary up until about a year and a half ago. I remember that, beginning in 1926, there was another congregation worshipping here. They told the same stories. They read from the same scripture. They sang many of the same hymns. They came because they sought to be a more faithful people.

It reminds me that when I was growing up in a church across town, I had the same kind of experience. I loved going to church. I loved the stories that we told. The stories began to haunt my imagination. Stories like this parable we've heard this morning. And we would hear these stories told – and preached about – and we would read them in Sunday School – and even though sometimes the person telling the story didn't do it in a dynamic or dramatic way, even if the preacher wasn't overwhelming, there was something just about the story that was enough.

The story was part of the tradition that churches like this one, and churches like mine across town, and churches like First Congregational on Merrimon Avenue were telling, because we were passing the tradition along to a new group of people – to learn again how to be faithful people in a new day and time.

I loved those stories. And the people in my church – we struggled with those stories and we talked about what they meant, and we all liked those stories a lot until we would get to the part in the story that says: “do this, and you will live.” Or, “go and do likewise.”

As a kid that used to trouble me. What do we do? How far do we go?

At the same time that the church was teaching these stories, I was learning at school and learning at home – don't take unnecessary risks. Always make sure that you stay safe. Don't speak to people you don't know.

How do you put all of that together?

I used to go and talk to the pastor about that, and I would say – please help me understand, because I can't quite figure out how to do this if you don't go all the way.

Now, I was lucky growing up, I had a pastor that was a rare individual who lived these kinds of stories in a remarkable way. His name was John Christy. I didn't learn this story about him until his memorial service, but he used to live in parsonages right beside the church, and oftentimes people would knock on the door needing something. He was there one day, somebody knocked on the door needing some money or some food, and John looked down and noticed that this man was wearing shoes that were about to fall off of

his feet. Now his daughter is telling this story at the memorial service, she was just a little girl at the time, she said she didn't stay and watch everything that happened, but what she realized was that when the man had left, she turned around and her dad was just in his sock feet. And this old tattered pair of shoes was sitting by the door. He had given this man the shoes off his feet. How far do we go?

I hear the story about my uncle Bill. When he was in elementary school, it was fall, time to go back to school, and my grandmother bought him a new jacket as the days got colder. She said to Bill – don't lose this jacket. We don't have the money to buy another one. Well, one day Bill came home – without the jacket. His mother said – where is the jacket, and Bill said: Well mom, there's a guy in my class who doesn't have enough money to buy a jacket. So I gave him mine, and I figured I can wear my old jacket for one more year. How far do we go? How much do we give?

That's the question I always wanted to have an answer for. What does it mean when Jesus says – go and do likewise. How far, how much do we have to do before it counts and makes a difference?

In this story, there's a lawyer, and we pretty much know that the lawyer was a Pharisee, and for the Pharisees the Torah was the most important part of the Jewish scriptures, and the Torah was the words the lawyer spoke back to Jesus – to love God with all we are, and to love neighbor as we love ourselves. So the lawyer comes to Jesus to ask a question. The text says he came to test Jesus. But I have a feeling that even if it was a test, even if the lawyer was a little hostile, I think this lawyer was interested because at heart, first of all, he too wanted to know what the text meant. He had been reading this text and debating this text with the Pharisees – wanting to know what does this mean.

When he comes to talk to Jesus, I think it is genuine, or at least partly genuine – we have a few lawyers here this morning, so I'm trying to be generous here – but I really think we can say that it was a genuine effort from somewhere inside of him to try and understand – what does it mean to be a person of faith and to live from this Torah statement.

The question he asks is – what must one do to have eternal life? Jesus said, well – you've been to synagogue school, you've been to worship, how do YOU read the text? And the lawyer quotes the pertinent text – to love God and neighbor – and Jesus says: You have answered right. Do this and you will find the life that you are searching for.

Now I think in my imagination, that Jesus began to turn away from the lawyer. It was an act of grace because Jesus didn't want to push the conversation any further. He turned away to talk with other people, wondering if the lawyer would pursue it further. Because he knew that if the lawyer did pursue it, they were going to get into a mess.

Jesus turns, and before he can go a step, the lawyer just can't help himself, and says – but, who is my neighbor? And Jesus turns around, and I have to believe, he looks this lawyer in the eye with compassion and love, and Jesus said: Let me tell you a story.

You know, it really is a wonderful method when you have to go to a hard place, to tell a story. And let the story do the work.

Jesus tells this remarkable story to a lawyer and a crowd of people. The story includes 6 characters. Not one, not one of the characters in the story, would have been a positive person for the lawyer. It would not have been someone that the lawyer looked upon favorably. It would not be someone that the lawyer wanted to be like. All of these would have had a negative connotation to the lawyer and to a lot of the people in the crowd.

There were the robbers, and these robbers were more than just opportune robbers, they were really what they called freedom fighters. They were terrorists. They were people who said, if you are well to do, we're going to attack you, we're going to take what you have, we're going to beat you, and if you happen to live, then you will remember us. Because you are a part of the ones that exploit the poor like us. And so, the lawyer wouldn't like the robbers very much.

The wounded person must have been a traveling merchant. Traveling merchants in that day and time were known to be "notoriously dishonest" – to use the words of Sharon Ringe. Why is it that anyone would want to respect a person like that.

Joshua Lesser is a rabbi in Atlanta. He tells a story – he was in New York City one night, traveling down a lonely road. It was cold and wintry. And he came upon a person whose car had broken down on the side of the road. They needed help. He begins to do what all of us do – he begins to look around and ask himself – is this a situation in which I should offer to help. Is it safe for me to do so? What do I need to think about? You know the questions that go through our heads. As he was thinking all this, he couldn't help but notice that on the back of this person's car were a bunch of bumper stickers. And all of them supported the wrong political candidates and the wrong causes. He realized – my gosh, this is my enemy. This is the person that stands up and works against everything I believe in. Why in the world would I want to help this person?

But as he continued to think about it he says to himself – you know, if it were me that was in trouble, if it was me that was in some danger, I would hope that – regardless of the bumper stickers on my car, regardless of what I might have done that got me into this trouble, regardless of what I believe or who I am – I would hope and indeed depend on someone to care enough to stop and help.

The wounded person was not someone the lawyer or anyone else might have had much respect for – except for the fact that this person needed help.

The innkeeper was not a respectable person in that time. We have to rethink this a little. My uncle Lawrence and I just returned from spending 5 nights in San Francisco – staying in hotels. They were nice hotels. I noticed around me people who seemed to have plenty of money to stay in a hotel. We had a nice bed, a good bathroom, a large tv, they provided us with a newspaper and coffee in the morning. But in the days of our story, only the lower people in society stayed in the inn. In the inn were the more undesirable

people and the unclean people. And who would want to stay with them. The innkeeper associated with the unclean – and thus was not to be respected.

Then there are the two religious leaders who walk on by. I would invite us not to judge them too quickly. You see, they were actually abiding by their job description. They were never to get close to anything or anyone that was impure or unclean – and certainly not to be close to a dead body. The religious leaders in our story did what they were called to do – by the religious establishment – and that was to pass on by.

That leaves us one character. It leaves us a Samaritan. Which brings up a lot of racist images, brings up a lot of negative history between the Jews and Samaritans. It brings up a lot of generational hatred and discrimination. So nobody in the crowd that day would have thought kindly of a Samaritan.

Jesus tells a story with six characters, none of which the lawyer is going to identify with favorably. So, why did he tell the story that way? What's the point?

He asks the lawyer back – who in the story was a neighbor to the wounded man? The lawyer can't even make himself say the word Samaritan, but instead says – the one who showed compassion. And Jesus said, then you go and do likewise.

At the heart of the Torah, at the heart of our call to love God and love neighbor, is basic, human compassion. I think it is our task in the church to increase our ability to be compassionate – with ourselves, with one another, and with our neighbors around the world. The real question that the lawyer was asking beyond who is my neighbor is – what are the boundaries? Who do I have to be kind to? Who do I have to help? It's like the person who asks Jesus – how many times must I forgive, 7 times? But Jesus said – no, 70 times 7! There is no boundary. There is no comfort zone. We are called to be a compassionate and loving people.

And for me, that's the problem. That's what's so hard. Because none of us does that very well in all situations. All of us, when we walk out of here and go wherever we are going to go, if we pass someone laying on the street, most of us are going to walk on by. That's what we've been taught to do. What does it mean to go, and do likewise?

This parable is not about do-goodism. Although it is fine for us to go and do acts of charity, and I encourage that and hope you will do that. But we are all the characters in the story. We are the ones who rob others of their dignity – whether we mean to or not. We are the ones who sometimes pass on by. Sometimes we are the ones, like the innkeeper, who offers to help when someone has been brought to us. Sometimes we are the one beaten up and wounded. And how quickly that can happen to any of us. I bet most of us are within 2-3 paychecks from not having insurance, not being able to afford medical care, not being able to pay for a mortgage. All of us who might be doing well right now in our system, all of us are vulnerable to becoming the wounded one at any time. By some change that comes unexpectedly. You know what I mean. You've been there.

And then there is the Samaritan who already knows what it's like to be the one looked down upon, discriminated against, to be the one that nobody treats well. And that is the one who has learned to be compassionate. To go and do likewise. Go and increase the ability to care. Go with your friends. Hold hands with your family and people in the church. We gather because we need to love and care for each other.

Now just like any situation, you hear the story. The story has been passed along for years and years. It's up to you, and it's up to me, to ask ourselves – how far will we push the meaning. How many questions will we ask. And we have to do that as we are able to do so. So take a step. Whatever step is the right step for you. Ask the questions you need to ask. Grapple with the challenges. We need to do that as a church as well.

What does it mean to go and do likewise?

I need community, because I'm likely to give myself the easy way out. And that's why I love the church. And I have loved these stories all my life. And I have struggled with these stories for 48 years. And I will struggle with them until the day I die. Because they are not easy stories to live with. But there is a gift in this story. It's more than just hearing it as a good story. This story is our story, and it takes us to the heart of our faith.

A couple weeks ago Noel and I were in Hartford, CT at the General Synod of the UCC. We got to hear Bill Moyers speak. He was a magnificent speaker. Very passionate. And at this time in his life, he's also feeling a little angry. He told the story about going to his church, which is Riverside Church in New York. He arrived early, so he pulled out the pew Bible and turned by chance to the gospel of Matthew. He realized for the first time that in the beginning of that gospel, Jesus is known as the prince of peace. And that's what we still like to call him – the Prince of Peace. But he said as he read through the rest of the gospel, he began to realize that Jesus was transformed in his life from the prince of peace to the disturber of the peace. And it was because he was so compassionate that he could not forget the people who suffered. Bill Moyers said – look at what has happened in our country the last 10-15 years. Look at the people who are suffering all over the world. And he said this to us – it's time for the church to wake up again, to find their heart and their compassion, and to find their voice, and to speak out with love. We need to disturb the peace that is not peace. There are people hurting all around us. We are hurting.

Go and do likewise.

John Dear says that Jesus is compassion personified. That Jesus has compassion for all who suffer. And Jesus invites us to do likewise.

I don't know what it means to you. But this is your tradition. This is your story. I invite you to go. It's an invitation – go as far as you can go today. And then a little bit more next week. Go, with each other and let's see where it takes us. Amen.