

July 10, 2022 Pentecost 5C
Luke 10:25-37
The Cost of Mercy

In the story of the Good Samaritan that we read today, where do the different characters end up? The robbers have done their foul deed and have walked off stage with whatever they stole from the traveler they attacked. The priest and the Levite have each gone back to church after overlooking the half-dead traveler lying beside the road. That traveler is recovering at an inn, where the innkeeper has been entrusted with his care and has received a down payment on whatever it will cost. The Samaritan has resumed his journey, promising to return to the inn and settle up accounts for the traveler's expenses, someone previously unknown to him. But where are we left, you and I, who hear this story? We listen to it together with an unknown law expert, the one who wants to know where his neighborly obligation begins and ends. Together with him, we hear this command of Christ, "Go and do likewise." We are given as an example of neighborliness this Samaritan, who at inconvenience and risk to himself, helps a half-dead stranger. Go and do likewise.

So that we can be better prepared to "go and do likewise," let's recast the story and put it in the 21st century in our own neighborhood.

This is a parable. It's fiction. There was a coffee shop in Columbia Heights, just a couple of blocks from St. Matthew Lutheran Church. One day, the pastor of St. Matthew came in to get some coffee on his way to somewhere else. He sat down to wait, busying himself with the paper, trying to avoid a man in the opposite corner who was clearly the worse for wear and crying silently. Just as the pastor's order was ready, in walked the chairman of St. Matthew's Discipleship Vision Board. The two shared a lively greeting and conversation as they waited for the chairman's coffee, with no acknowledgement of the man in the corner who had put his head down in his arms and was heaving with sobs. In fact, as they were leaving, they commented to one another, "What is with that guy?" just as the next customer was coming up to the door.

The customer was a young woman with short, spiky hair dyed in a rainbow of colors, heavy black make-up on her eyes and lips, wearing all black, with piercings in her eyebrow, lip, and several in her ears. The pastor and the DVB

chairman gave her a wide berth and both thought to themselves, "What's with kids these days?" as they left the parking lot to get to their next destination.

The young woman came in and immediately noticed the man sobbing in the corner. She was moved with compassion. He didn't look good – he had a black eye and what seemed like blood matted in his hair, and he was of a different race. There was no one else around. The barista was doing something in the back and the pastor and the DVB chairman had departed. She sat down across from the man and stated the obvious, "It looks like you're having a hard time," and added, "May I buy you a cup of coffee?"

The man looked up with bloodshot eyes and saw a face looking at him with caring and concern, nothing else. She was the only person that had spoken to him in all the time he had been there that morning. She got some paper towels from the bathroom and a cup of water from the barista, as well as the man's coffee, and cleaned off his wound while he drank and told her his story. The young woman realized quickly that he had been mugged and proceeded to help him contact the police, as well as buy him a gift certificate for the coffee shop so he could order whatever he wanted for the next couple of meals. She gave him some bus tokens that she had so that he could get to his job so he wouldn't get fired, and called him at his work later to make sure that he was on the mend.

The man wanted to pay her back, but she refused and wouldn't let him know where to find her. The young woman told him that she was a neighbor and that's what neighbors do. He told her that he had never seen her in his neighborhood and thought that her understanding of being a neighbor was broader than his. She laughed good-naturedly and told him he was right, wished him well, and hung up the phone. The man sat back with amazement.

The distressed man was amazed and rightfully so.

As we hear this modern re-telling of the Good Samaritan story, it can cut us to the quick. Yes, it's fiction and, sure, it's full of stereotypes, but there is a grain of truth to each character, and we have all been in each character's shoes in one way or another. We have all been asked by God through circumstance to expand our vision of what it means to be neighborly. Like the people who would have heard today's gospel story in Luke's community, we have boundaries and rules that we live by. In the Jewish culture of that time, there were rules about how men should treat women, parents should treat children, Jews should treat

foreigners, Jews should treat gentiles and Samaritans, and so forth. These systems set up a social order where certain positions of power and privilege were well maintained. Their society was not so different than ours is now over 2,000 years later. We have those systems in place, and they are difficult to escape or transcend.

Yet, this is precisely what Jesus was calling the people of his time to do, and it translates to ours.

Now let's move away from parables and tell a true story. This happened last Wednesday night. There was a St. Matthew youth outing last Wednesday night at Silver Lake beach. The main purpose of this outing, was to baptize Jack, who had begun coming to St. Matthew a couple of years ago with the Neaderhiser family and recently expressed a desire to be baptized and wanted to do it with the rest of the youth group present. So we scheduled a swimming party and cookout at Silver lake beach.



After the baptism, I went home and many of the kids and parents stayed and swam and played volleyball. At one point, one of the kids came over to Faustina, our youth leader, and said that there were some people that needed help and she needed to call 911. She and some of other adult leaders went over to check on them and found a young man and

woman so inebriated that they couldn't stand up. They tried to help them walk over to the picnic tables and have some food, but they were too drunk. They did call 911. The man had an outstanding warrant and was taken away in a patrol car. They called an Uber to get the woman home and prayed with her as she got in the car. Again, this is no parable. This is what our youth and their leaders did last Wednesday night.

We all know these types of stories and must ask ourselves if we are willing to pay the price of mercy or just walk on by.

Being a true neighbor means that we are living actively and not passively in the kingdom of God.

In today's epistle reading, Paul tells the Colossians that he and Timothy are praying for them so that they "may lead lives worthy of the Lord ... as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God." Our faith journeys take a lifetime.

We cannot do this alone, and it is clear our work is never done. We continue to ask Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" and Jesus continues to answer with results that should not surprise us, knowing how Jesus works, but they always do: the marginalized one, the different-colored one, the one with a different culture, the old one, the young one, the one missing all her teeth, the one with the flashy car, the one who is us.

What is surprising is how difficult it is to show mercy to those who do not fit in our boundaries, despite what we know Jesus is asking of us.

Living a merciful life is not defined as helping someone once. Instead, it is a life in which a person's character is formed by the basic premise that they love God, love their neighbor, and love themselves. To put it another way, Mahatma Gandhi was once quoted as saying:

"Your beliefs become your thoughts,
Your thoughts become your words,
Your words become your actions,
Your actions become your habits,
Your habits become your values,
Your values become your destiny."

The call to go and do likewise is challenging and transforming. Living out mercy changes us as a people. We are blessed with God's own mercy and grace as we strive to walk worthy of God's calling in our own lives and communities. Now, go and do likewise.