



July 11, 2010
Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

*Have Mercy?**
Rev. James Lamkin

Psalm 82; Colossians 1:1-14; Luke 10:25-37

Mercy is the operative word in this morning's story. It's only used once...and that by the antagonist at the tail-end of the story...but it is the rearview mirror, a lens of mercy, through which we are invited to look at one another...at our neighbors...and at ourselves. To whom do we show mercy?

When I hear the word *mercy*, I hear it in the soft Virginia voice of Jim Williams who often said when he was appalled, "Lawud have *mussy!*" "Jim, how's Co-Cola stock doing?" "Lawud have *mussy!*" "Jim, how about a Pepsi?" "Lawud have *mussy!*"

Well, wouldn't it be something if this day in this worship service, the Lord did just that—the Lord had mercy—on you and your life? Wouldn't it be something if you left here today more mercy-filled and merciful to yourself and to others?

The gospel lesson today is part of the soul food diet of all of us, who grew-up in south...or as Flannery O'Connor called it, the Christ-Haunted-South. It is as organic to our nourishment as grits and gravy and greens from the garden...it is the story of the Good Samaritan. Soul food. The story is as familiar as our next-door neighbor's clothesline...when we used to have clotheslines.

But sometimes familiarity can work against us. It is easy to stop listening when we think we've heard it. The Prodigal Son...yeah, I know. The Sermon on the Mount...yes, heard that one.

Fred Craddock says the hardest persons to convert to Christianity...are Christians, because our familiarity with the faith has a numbing effect on the gospel's radicality. And I think the Good Samaritan is an example.

It is a subversive story told by Jesus. Ever heard the statement, "Myths create worlds; parables overturn them?"

All societies create myths, stories of what is right and who is right. Who is in and who is out. Who is to be favored; and who is to be neglected. Who should be honored, and who should be shunned.

Then along comes Jesus who marched by the beat of a different drummer that everyone is in the same place before God. That God loves all and is wanting to be merciful to all. How scandalous is that?

Our familiarity with this story has also tamed the wildness right out of this story. We've turned it into a helper story. Nothing wrong with that. But its shock waves don't stop there.

Last year at Taliaferro we used this story. The kids dressed-up and played all the parts. Some especially liked to be the bandits who beat-up and rob the guy. Dr. Gordon Davis played the part of the victim—and he improvised with all sorts of other critters that afflicted him in the ditch: rattlesnakes, elephants, scorpions, plus a 'possum. Plus, there was the Good Samaritan's donkey. This wicker donkey has been a prop in every children's Christmas nativity play since the 50's, along with the costumes we took twice to Guatemala since the fifties. I found a pin on one of the Wise Men's Crowns that says, "I like Ike."

One of the world's great stories.

But, the movie doesn't end here. Unfortunately the lead line almost gets buried following the lawyer's silent squirming and following Jesus' question, which one was the neighbor? He can't name the answer, did you notice? He can't say, *the Samaritan*. It may defile his mouth. It may break his tongue. He simply says, "The one who showed him mercy."

Mercy. Lord have mercy. There it is.

The real punchline is mercy. Some scholars say it parable is better named the *Merciful Samaritan*.

So what is mercy? Jennifer Lord, homiletics prof at the Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Austin says "Mercy is different from goodness. The word *eleos* implies something broader than the juridical sense we often bring to the concept of mercy, and it means something more than forgiving a debt or an offense. *Eleos* suggests blessing and unwarranted compassion as well as leniency. It is about pardon, kindness, strength and even rescue and generosity."

It is a word at the heart of many prayers, "Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner." Some traditions, like that of Eastern Orthodox, repeat that mantra so frequently that it is like a massage that kneads deeply into the muscles, an anointing with oil that soaks deep into the bones. I like to think of it as settling into a yoga pose that lets a repetitive stretch do its work. Lord have mercy.

And just who is worthy to receive mercy? Your mercy? God's mercy?

Amy-Jil Levine is professor at Vanderbilt. She is Jewish and teaches Bible including New Testament with angular and fresh insight. She says the entry point of experiencing the scandal of the parable is to think of yourself in the ditch, then say, "I'd rather than die than receive help from _____. I'd rather die than to let her help me, or him help me, or them—that group—help me!"

Who would that be for you?

If you can get to that name, that person, those persons... then you are close.

You are in the ditch needing help and someone stops to help, you say “thank God you’re here.” And the person says, “I don’t mind. I am 70 years old and am on my way to my first Gay Pride Parade; but I know what it is like to be excluded. After all these years, another day won’t hurt.”

Or a Klansman stops. Or a member of Al-Qaeda.

You are a fourth generation shrimper on the Louisiana Gulf Coast and had to move to your brother’s house in Tulsa because...your car breaks down...and the president of BP stops to help.

If you can emotionally get there—then you can feel the tension then you are close to what it meant to have a Samaritan stop and offer help.

Later the lawyer will be told , “go do mercy,” And we feel that same commission: Want to hear some Taliaferro stories? Go do. Want to see some sunburns that Eric and youth got this week working at inner city mission? Go do. Want to hear about women who deliver flowers on Monday, and members who deliver food from the food bank weekly? Go do. And many of you who serve on boards and foundations whose sole purpose is to go do good. Yes, go do.

But before we go out again to go do; we can pause and be honest about having grown weary in well-doing. We can pause in the parable’s fermata—hanging not like a sword above our head, but like an umbrella sheltering us from the fatiguing sun.

To be able to go do mercy, we must first stop and receive mercy.

But just stay in the ditch a minute. Feel a bit further the pain that has pushed you down: maybe the downturned economy or high cost healthcare or the edge of family tension that can cut like a knife or the dis-ease of depression that can drain energy like a hole in the bucket and make your feet feel like they are made of concrete, or your grief that wears the cameo gear of anger...plus, there is the worse abuser, the worst bully of all,—yourself as you criticize and judge and demean your own self...and thus you have little mercy to share with others.

Imagine that you are in the ditch of your own life and much of life is passing you by...but then comes God. God, who is not just good, but merciful.

This was the *modes operendi* of the Psalmists. They prayed their imaginations and imagined their prayers. Psalm 40: God inclined to me and heard my cry. God lifted me up out of the miry clay making my footsteps firm.”

Psalm 82 today. “Give strength to the weak and needy. Deliver them from the hand of the wicked. Rescue the perishing care for the dying.”

And imagine that mercy soaking you to the bone. Imagine that mercy hydrating your soul. Imagine that. Imagine your shallow, anxious breathing replaced by God’s calming deeply cleansing breath. Lord have mercy.

As God is merciful to us, can we then be merciful to ourselves? And then upon being merciful to ourselves, then we are more able, to love our neighbor. Then we are more able to follow Jesus instructions, “Go thou and do likewise.”

*These are some of the notes that James Lamkin used in preaching the Sunday morning sermon.