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Deuteronomy 30: 9 – 14
Colossians 1: 1 – 14

Psalm 25: 1 - 9
Luke 10: 25 – 37

Karl Barth, one of the great mid-20th century theologians, once said, “Doing theology is having the newspaper in one hand and the Bible in the other.” We should probably update that a little for some of us who get our news elsewhere these days, but how can we have a more appropriate Gospel reading than what we have today considering the events of the past week? I think that our country is perhaps on the road to Jericho.

Show us your ways and teach us your paths.

The road from Jerusalem to Jericho is a lonely road. This wilderness of rocks and dust, without a living plant in sight, is treacherous. Not only is the trail difficult to walk, but behind every rock outcropping, there lurks the danger of a thief or worse. The sun, in the heat of the day, burns down, baking any shred of moisture out of earth and beast. It is quiet, deathly quiet, except for the occasional howling of wind, kicking up sand and dust into blinding swirls as it rounds the edges of the rocks. Even the wind is hot. Only necessity leads someone to take this road.

One of the eddies of dust swirls over the face of a man, beaten, bruised and bleeding, lying along the trail. The sand sticks to the caked blood and sweat of the man, who is moaning lowly and only barely conscious. The man lies stripped of everything, save his now ragged, filthy and bloodstained undergarment. His donkey, with its baskets of bread and water and fruit – the man’s only provisions for his journey – gone. The man’s cloak and his small purse with all his savings – gone. The man’s dignity and security, perhaps his very life, gone. This road has claimed another victim of violence.

Only seldom do travelers pass each other on this road, and then it is with a distance of wariness. The man has been lying here in the dirt for some time before there is the sound of another’s footsteps on the trail. Wearing the vestments of a priest of the Temple, the man is focused on the arduousness and purpose of his journey. Suddenly, the priest comes around a bend in the road and becomes aware of the man lying beaten and near dead in the road. Shaking his head in a distant – yet sympathetic – way, the priest inwardly decries the senseless violence. Saying a prayer, a Kiddush, for the man who is either dead or soon will be, the priest continues on his way. There doesn’t appear to be much he can do for the man, and if he, a priest, even so much as touches him, he will be ritually defiled and not able to perform his duties of sacrifice and worship in the Temple. The figure of the priest soon disappears, nervously and quickly, down the path in the direction of Jerusalem.

Time passes as the man in the road sinks deeper into unconsciousness and as whatever tendril of hope he may have left shrinks even further. Then, once again, coming into view is another man, a Levite. He, too, is on his way to serve in the Temple. The Levite is shocked out of his reverie by the sight of the man lying before him in the road. The Levite slows down as he approaches the man. Cautiously, the Levite bends down to look at the man’s face. After all, this could merely be an ambush by someone wanting to rob him. Squinting into the unconscious man’s dirty and beaten face, the Levite satisfies himself that this is not someone he has seen before or probably will ever again. As the Levite straightens up, he notices that the man is still breathing, but just barely. Being careful not to touch the injured man, because like the priest, the Levite will be defiled and unable to perform his appointed service in the Temple, the Levite makes a mental note to stop at the next wayfarer’s inn and send some

help. The Levite continues down the path, turning around only briefly to take one last look at the man he knows could well be himself.

The sun is well into the western sky before another traveler, a man from Samaria, comes upon the wounded man. Filled with compassion and concern, the Samaritan quickly dismounts from his donkey, and rushes to stoop down beside the man. Cradling the man's head in his arms, the Samaritan quickly takes stock of the man's injuries. With care, the injuries, though serious, are healable. And so, getting his travel bag off of his donkey, the Samaritan reaches into the bag for vials of water, wine and oil – water to revive, wine to cleanse and oil to soothe. Tearing strips of cloth from the hem of his own garment, the Samaritan gently binds up the broken man. Then, slowly, carefully, the Samaritan helps the tattered, now somewhat conscious man to his feet., taking care to arrange what is left of the man's clothing to provide him with a modicum of dignity. Then, the Samaritan puts the man onto his own donkey. The immediacy of his own journey forgotten, the Samaritan throws his travel bag over a shoulder and walks alongside the donkey, supporting the injured man to keep him from slipping off the beast. Slowly, the two men begin down the path, stopping now and then to rest.

At last, they reach a small inn. The Samaritan leaves the injured man in the care of the innkeeper. Secure in the knowledge that this stranger is settled in and will be taken care of, the Samaritan hands the innkeeper a few silver coins – as much as he might earn in a couple days work. He will check on the man on his way back through the area. The Samaritan goes back out into scorching sun and continues his journey.

Some of us have heard this story, known as the Good Samaritan, many times. It is one of the best known of Jesus' parables. It is even in our culture in the names of places to camp while traveling, and in the law to protect those who stop to help injured parties. We know this story, and it is as obvious to us as it is to the scribe who questions Jesus what the right answer is to the question, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus has turned the tables on the lawyer. The lawyer wants Jesus to provide him with a nice, neat definition of exactly who is and who isn't considered to be a neighbor. But Jesus changes the focus from other to self, and from 'who' to 'how.' Rather than worrying about defining and limiting who are God's people, Jesus says in effect, worry about whether your own conduct is befitting of one of God's chosen people. God's people are people of compassion rather than compulsion. God's people are people who willingly put themselves in the path of those who suffer and who follow the example of Jesus. God's people are people who see all of the world as one world and become involved in its pain.

In his letter to the Colossians, the apostle Paul prays that the Colossians may be "filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding so that [they] may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to God." It is that knowledge of God's will, God's compassion, that Jesus models for us in how we are to live our lives. But we are pretty typical Americans. We, like the priest and the Levite, are always in a hurry, our days filled with the busy-ness of family, work, play, church. We, like the priest and the Levite, have our appointed cultic duties to perform, and we are often loath to be deterred from our schedules. We cannot look at or listen to the news without hearing about the violence in our world and sometimes in our own backyard, and we nod with sympathy at those who are in trouble. Perhaps we say a prayer as they pass out of our sight. Or perhaps we denigrate those in trouble by holding them accountable for their own situation. Note that Jesus never talks about *how* the man came to be lying in the road, he just is. Jesus doesn't mention it because it doesn't matter. It isn't about blame – it's about love and respect. We tend to leave the wounded, the troubled, the beaten and broken, the hungry and the naked to the 'professionals' – the social workers, the police, the hospitals, the helping-hand organizations to which we send money. Like the priest and the Levite, we so often

hold back from getting our hands dirty. We are afraid of getting involved. Afraid of making ourselves vulnerable or perhaps putting our lives in peril. Perhaps afraid of not knowing what to do. The truth is that it is easier to be compassionate in principle than it is actually to be compassionate in practice. And so we pass by...

Most of us, though, also hunger for meaning and purpose in our lives. We do seek to make the world a better place, to make a difference. So we pray. "Show us *your* ways, Lord, and teach us *your* paths." And God does show us the path to loving God and neighbor. The trouble is, sometime those paths lead us into places like the wilderness between Jericho and Jerusalem. Places that are scary, unfamiliar, sometimes lonely, sometimes dangerous.

Jesus says, "The first commandment is this: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these." Such simple commandments. And such difficult things to live into. Because, just like the lawyer who questions Jesus, we want to be able to define just exactly who our neighbors are. Or aren't. But Jesus tells us our neighbors are anyone who needs us. No exceptions. Jesus writes this word in our hearts and on our lips. And it is a word about HOW we are to love, not WHO we are to love. Love isn't about like. Love isn't about some warm, fuzzy feeling. Love is an act of the will. Love is an action verb. Love is about caring for another child of God.

Show us your ways, Lord, and teach us your paths. It is nice think that Jesus is putting the lawyer on a new path, where self-justification and self-vindication are overcome by compassion and mercy. We don't know what happens with the lawyer. All we can really know is what happens with us. Jesus speaks just as loudly to us in shattering our own defenses and our cultural conventions. Jesus asks us to be people of God, not afraid to put ourselves in the path of suffering and pain of any kind. Jesus calls us – who like the Samaritan with his donkey and water and wine and oil, have been blessed with so much – Jesus calls us to be sources of healing for the people God places in our path, or to whom we are led.

Who is our neighbor? The one who is in need of our compassion and mercy and ACTION. Go and do likewise, Jesus tells the lawyer. Go and do likewise, Jesus says to us. Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. +