

Rev. Rebecca L. Kiser

A Baptist, a Catholic and a Presbyterian row out on the lake.....

OK, I've set you all up to expect a joke, haven't I? In fact, I think I remember a book of jokes with that opening line....It's a common opening line – kinda like, "A guy walks into a bar..." An anecdote or joke is being set up. In our Baptist, Catholic and Presbyterian opener, who's going to be the good guy, or the funny guy? Yes, the punch line is going to come from the Presbyterian. Evidently the Israelites had a story opener like that which said, "A priest, a Levite and an Israelite....", which would poke fun at the educated and ultra religious folks, and have just a regular Israelite be the wit and wisdom guy. Jesus is playing on that story form as he tells this parable we just read, which lots of folks know and call The Good Samaritan. Only Jesus puts a new spin on it – "A priest, a Levite, and..." what are we expecting to hear? "And an Israelite." What do we hear? "And a Samaritan." That would have been quite shocking for those folks to hear, because Samaritans were bad guys. You spit when you said it. Enemies, half-breeds, infidels. And the feeling ran both ways.

What do we have that compares? Let's try and get the feeling here. If we put ourselves in the place of the guy in the ditch, the victim, beat up, robbed, lying by the road, unable to reach our cell phone and call 911, our OnStar having run out, rather invisible to people going by – or else just ignored – OK, we're that person – who would be the very last person we'd expect to see – who would shock us the most as they leaned over us to help us? I thought about this a bit. My stereotypes being alive and well, I'd probably be scared if a gang-banger type, black or white or Latino leaned over me – and shocked if they actually helped me. I might be surprised if people in Arab or Muslim dress helped me. I'd be very surprised if an ultra urban preppy suit and tie type put down their iPhone and helped me instead of taking my picture and uploading it I'd be very scared if folks like those in our movie Winter's Bone came by me and leaned over me. How about you all? In our cynical day and age, I seem to be insecure about **anyone's** ulterior motives – a terrorist could be a normal-looking person, and anyone might be tempted to get away with something if they could, even that person in scrubs or a clergy collar. We've all heard too many stories about a local nice guy being revealed as a serial killer. And many people are just self-absorbed. Others might be so used to seeing bums by the side of the road that they become invisible. Anyway, I guess my biggest shock

would come if I were helped by someone in certain stereotypical dress about which I've made assumptions.

A clergy friend of mine was a chaplain at a big hospital chain that made the news when a man collapsed on the sidewalk just outside the ER doors. Evidently hospital staff people stepped over him coming in to work, and folks who tried to tell the staff the man needed help were told to call 911, that insurance was such that they couldn't just bring the man in – an ambulance had to bring him. Eventually someone called 911 and that's what happened. My friends forwarded the news story to a bunch of us as a modern day, cynical, Good Samaritan illustration. Every day in our world people ignore even blatant cries for help from nearby people, not wanting to get involved, invest the time, fearful of lawsuits, suspicious of scams, not wanting to get used, or lots of other reasons.

On one level, Jesus' message, which is both simple and obvious to almost all readers and listeners, even the Jewish Law scholar who poses the question, sounds easy to our ears. That's if we hear it at the level of, "We should be nice to hurt people, even enemies, and make donations to good charities." Yet if we sit with the story a bit longer, we begin to hear it at an even deeper level, as a call to a way of compassionate life even to those who wrong us on this journey of life, and it becomes actually harder to do that we think. A commentator suggested that it is perhaps the essence of living out our faith, this compassion for any in our path who need it. "To move a person from the condition of natural self-preoccupation to one of profound concern for others, the whole gospel – with the cross at its center – is required." (Feasting on the Word, Douglass John Hall, p.240) Simple but not simplistic is what another said.

The Law scholar to whom Jesus is talking, who can't even bring himself to say the name "Samaritan," has to say, "the one who showed him kindness," in answer to Jesus' question. He actually gives us a good word for today, though – kindness. I was privileged to hear Huston Smith lecture at a conference I attended - the Huston Smith who wrote the definitive book on world religions and who has a series of films being interviewed by Bill Moyers - and at the closing of his lecture he summarized the deep essence of all major world religious traditions with the word "kindness" - how we live with each other in the world based on our faith in God comes out to be summed up in his word "kindness." That's profound. And it's a lifelong struggle.

Kindness is not the description I'd choose to use for much of modern life, which for many of us is a dangerous road indeed. I was struck by the geographic setting of Jesus' story – coming down from Jerusalem to Jericho – coming down the mountain literally – and coming down from the holy place into the real world, metaphorically. Like coming from Sunday church to Monday morning at

work, with all the hassles of getting everyone out the door, the commute, the boss, the co-workers, the expectations, the bills, the pressures, etc etc. People can be rude, and we can be hurt, angered; we're tempted to respond in kind either to them, or later at home, to our own family. As our own bills come in, we get mad at the government that imposes taxes just to take minimal care of lazy people who have become dependent on welfare and know how to abuse it – that's our stereotyping, not my opinion by the way. We get mad at insurance companies who figure out ever-new ways to look good while charging us more and making things more complicated. We get mad at those hypocrites in church who act so holy although we see another side of them during the week. We feel no compulsion to treat the telemarketers nicely, or speak softly to the person we eventually get on the phone when we call in to a credit card company to dispute a charge. Our blood pressure goes up, our stress level goes up, then we get overwhelmed at our true powerlessness and want to shoot it out with someone. We have to deal with people in the downstairs apartment who fuss about the sound of us walking across the floor, or the couple in the house next door who party outside until 1 or 2 and then get mad at our dog for barking at 9 in the morning. We have to deal with the waitstaff who gets our order wrong, or the company we call for tech support taking 45 minutes to answer a simple question. We have to deal with people who cut us off and take the parking place we were aiming for. We have to deal with mean people who get away with doing unjust things to us, but who the law can't touch. We're almost afraid to offer kindness, because people will think we're weak and therefore good victims.

Then there are the chronically dangerous places on our road – sour family relationships of long-standing, with lots of barbs back and forth; someone with whom we've had a bad relationship since 1<sup>st</sup> grade; a significant other who hurts us deep in our heart; people to whom we almost automatically react defensively or angrily. They are hurting people; we are hurting people. Maybe they'd be shocked to receive kindness at our hands; or visa versa – we'd be shocked to receive kindness from them.

The truth of the story is that we've played each of those roles at some point. We've all been the wounded and attacked traveler on this journey of life. Some people might seem to live more golden lives than we do, but by and large none of us escape unscathed. We've all needed the assistance and kindness of others – and we've been passed by as well as sometimes helped.

We've all been the priest and the Levite – seeing hurting people around us and unwilling to offer what we can for some reason or another.

We've all been the religious lawyer - splitting hairs, trying to justify ourselves as good people, proving that we follow the law the best – when Christ came to give us an abundant life of

grace that's free from legalistic stuff. My favorite illustration of this kind of thinking was a parishioner who came to me with the question – did her tithe have to be on her gross income, or on her net? Did she have to start counting the 10% on her before-tax income? Or could she just tithe her after tax and deduction income? I told her she missed the whole point of generosity and giving and freedom and grace. I told this story to another group later, and they didn't get it – they said, well, what was the answer? In my imagination I could hear this scribe from the story saying, well just who is my neighbor? Enumerate, please, who I have to be kind to, Jesus, so I can do it right.

Jesus is a smart cookie. He avoids the whole nit-picking argument of just what it takes to fulfill the law, of trying to determine how little we can do and still be OK with God. He tells a story that we have to wrestle with, and makes us answer the question ourselves. Wanting to get it right is not a bad place to start on our faith growth – it just sounds like kids arguing on the playground over what the rules are, carefully marking the lines of foul and fair, and how you have to retag the base before you can run. We all start there – and there's often still a part of us that lives there, and wants to defend ourselves and our actions.

Faith, however, grows. And at some point we realize that the whole grace thing, the whole forgiveness thing, the whole kindness thing, the whole abundant life thing, has nothing to do with the laws we used to try so hard to follow. Rather, it's Christ's Spirit in our heart leading us further into compassion at each step of the journey.

And most of us at some point ask that lawyer's question – we want eternal life, which is a good thing to want; but just who do we have to love? It's a difficult thing to watch good people faith decide that both being believers gives them permission to be ugly to one another, to fight horribly and divisively over matters of doctrine, for example, or mission, or who to accept as church members. I'm sure that at our GA this week there will be lots of spirited discussion, even debate – and I'm equally sure that some will step over that line and give vent to ugliness and meanness and spite, be really fighting – and giving some low blows. We're still human, and we still have strong feelings about our opinions. Sometimes kindness is most difficult to those of the family.

Yet as we listen to Jesus' story, that's the call we hear. May each of us continue to be drawn further into the struggles of faith, and learn kindness to one another as our creed of life. AMEN.