

Do This and You will Live
August 12, 2018
Rev. Dr. Anne Miner-Pearson

If you've been here during the last 3 weeks, you may have noticed that the prayers and biblical passages are highlighting God in Creation. As summer winds to a close, our worship is designed to bring even more of the outside in - as if we aren't aware of the hot, muggy weather on Sunday mornings! So, this morning, we began praising God for "ocelot and owl, cactus and kelp, lichen and whale.... whirlwind and lava, tide and topsoil, cliff and marsh." We believe prayer changes us and I have to tell you that that opening prayer created a change in me when I first read it last Monday. Actually, I didn't realize the change until after I read through the gospel, that very, very familiar story "The Good Samaritan." That had to be one of the first Bible stories all of us learned. It's so widely known that there are laws about helping injured people called "Good Samaritan" laws.

So familiar, yet, it seemed different to me this time. The story got bigger. Its side edges stretched out. The bottom dropped deeper. The top reached higher, causing me to realize that, over the years, the story had shrunk to a narrow point. And we all know the point: everyone is our neighbor. But today's prayer opened me. I was no longer standing on a familiar, rutted path leading to a set point. This time "The Good Samaritan" story got bigger. In fact, I wondered if, by giving the story a title and making the story into a "point", we might have missed the point.

What if.... what if Jesus is really testing us to see if we can follow where he is taking us? What if Jesus is not telling a story to lead us to the right answer about a particular situation, but telling a story of life so open and free, soaring and exploring, surprising and connected that such a life is inherited and ours, eternal and starting right now.

We know where the scene opens. A lawyer has a very individual, specific question of Jesus. "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Now, you can't get more self-concerned than that. What must **I do** ...? Tell me about me, Jesus. It's about me, Jesus. Jesus answers - so, what do you know so far? Where has your faith taken you? The lawyer replies with the most encompassing Hebrew law. In those days, there are hundreds of detailed, particular laws, but the lawyer thinks big: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."

Passing Jesus' test, he probes Jesus further. His wish for eternal life morphs into a self-justification project. "And who is my neighbor?" This time Jesus moves out of law and into the world of imagination, composing a story. As with all stories, it begs to be interpreted. But, unfortunately, this story has inherited a title - something Jesus probably never did. Titles have a way of setting up exceptions and narrowing the focus. Thus, the title tells every new generation that this is a story about **the Samaritan who was good and showed mercy**. Of course, the story is about that, but as I said earlier, this time around the story got bigger for me, thanks to a prayer about ocelot and owl, cactus and kelp.

For the first time, I noticed how many players Jesus includes in his imagined world of healing and mercy. There are more than just two bad guys and one good one from across the border. For the first time, I realized that healing happens because a whole web of players are drawn together. The man beset by robbers and left for dead receives mercy through a flow of relationships. Yes, it begins with a single man, but notice how healing and mercy spreads beyond him.

First, fruits of the earth, oil and wine, are part of the healing. Cloth bandages woven by human hands hold the salve in place. A four-legged beast has a part in making a two-legged creature whole. Also, cultural infrastructure is at the ready. An inn along the road provides safety and hospitality. Inside resides an innkeeper willing to be involved. He could have easily refused to care for an injured stranger. A door on a dangerous stretch of wilderness between Jerusalem and Jericho could be selectively closed without fear of bankruptcy. A couple of denarii and a verbal promise of more would not cover possible liability in such a circumstance. That innkeeper could have let fear and skepticism dictate his actions. Yet, he takes a place in the web of healing and mercy. Little by little, one by one, Jesus' story becomes more than the heroic actions of one person in relationship to another person. The story Jesus tells is about how all creation, all life, is a whole. No one piece operates solo.

So, you may wonder: how does my interpretation line up with Jesus' last question: "which of the three, do you think, was the neighbor?" That last exchange sounds like Jesus means for the story to be about just one man and have just one take-away: his followers are to do personal, single good deeds for other people, even their enemies. Yes, I believe that probably is what Jesus is thinking when he tells the story. I also believe that we are called to such good and merciful 1-1 actions.

Yet, I believe we need to remember that Jesus comes out of an unspoken, assumed trust of God's healing and mercy always flowing out of the deep and wide connection of all forms of life. Given Jesus' time in history, both he and all those around him would have trusted that bigger reality like the air they breathed. Think about Jesus' time period. Think about the subject of many of his stories, images and examples. Creation, nature is always there in abundance. Fig trees, sheep, mustard seeds, planting and harvest - the list goes on and on. Jesus lives in a time when humans experience a close relationship with nature - what they see in the sky, what they feel with their hands, what their ears hear in the air. All creation is alive with the presence of God. Creation is the vessel of God's healing and mercy. Jesus knows and lives from a profound experience of emerging from a whole and belonging to a whole.

Look at the passage from Jonah. All the animals, herd or flock, are included in the transforming fast. Listen again to the psalm: "All your works shall give thanks to you, O Lord, and all your faithful shall bless you." From the epistle, we hear of God's plan in Christ to gather all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth." Jesus doesn't need to point his hearers to the healing presence and power of animals, products from the earth and made by human hands.

But, we need Jesus to point us. In our time, we are significantly separate from the healing and life-giving presence of the natural world. Our food comes encased in cellophane and boxes. The source of healing has been narrowed to a pill and surgery. Changes in our climate contribute to destruction of forests, species and eco-systems. God's life web of healing and mercy is developing significant holes.

We need more than one Good Samaritan to notice the injuries, to stop life as planned and to change course. We need to take personal, sacrificing actions toward healing. And, like the Good Samaritan, it will cost us and right now, we don't know the exact amount. So, we have to commit to staying in there, coming back and not moving on, in order to repay for the injuries incurred on our roads between Jerusalem and Jericho. Like the innkeeper, we need to make it our business to be healers. Like the Samaritan, we need to show God's mercy to the wounded in our world. For as Jesus said to the lawyer, "Do this and you will live." Amen