

The Presbyterian Church in Canada
St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

January 12th, 2020

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WE GATHER IN GOD'S PRESENCE

Prelude

*Entry of the Word

Welcome and Announcements

Introit *"Now greet the swiftly changing year"* #810

Call to Worship

*Hymn *"Immortal, invisible, God only wise"* #290

Prayer of Approach and Lord's Prayer

Assurance of Pardon

Minister: The peace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

People: And also with you.

*Sharing the Peace of Christ *May the God of hope*

*Hymn *"Jesus loves me, this I know"* #373

WE LISTEN TO GOD'S WORD

Children's Message

Prayer of Illumination

Responsive Psalm #82

Old Testament Lesson:

Deuteronomy 15:7-11.....Page 171-2

Large Print Bible.....Page 298

New Testament Lesson:

Luke 9:51-56, 10:25-37.....Page 70-2

Large Print Bible.....Page 1621-24

Reader: The Word of the Lord

People: Thanks be to God

Anthem *"All through the year"*

Message *"Fellow Travellers"*

WE RESPOND TO GOD

*Hymn *"Where cross the crowded ways of life"* #760

The Offering

*Doxology *"Praise God from whom all blessings flow"* #830

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

WE ARE SENT OUT AS GOD'S PEOPLE

*Hymn *"Lord, whose love!"* #722

*Charge and Benediction

*Blessing *"Sing amen"* #264

Sing amen! Amen, we praise your name, O God.

Sing amen! Amen, we praise your name, O God.

Sing amen! Amen, amen, amen, amen,

Amen, we praise your name, O God.

*The Word Goes with Us

Postlude

January 12th 2020 – St Andrew's [Travel Light/Fellow Travellers]

Sermon – “Fellow Travellers”

We take up the story of Jesus' ministry at a pivotal moment in his time on earth:

knowing that his time was coming to an end,

Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem.

Up until this point,

he's mostly confined his preaching, teaching and miracles

to the region of Galilee, in what is today northern Israel.

But now he is on the move,

heading slowly but inexorably toward Jerusalem;

to the triumph of Palm Sunday,

his death on Good Friday,

and his resurrection to new life

on Easter.

Before we leave Christmas behind, though, I wonder

if some of you remember a question I posed

during our last sermon before Christmas.

In talking about the shepherds, working the night shift,

watching their flocks alone on the hillside

while other people were safely tucked away in bed,

I wondered how many of us

would be among the first to know

if Jesus came again

as quietly and humbly

as he did in Bethlehem?

In the Gospels, Jesus does not seem to spend much time in the synagogues,

the Jewish equivalent of church and school combined.

Early in his ministry, he taught and read Scripture from time to time;

the most memorable of course is when he walked in,

read a bit of Isaiah about the messiah,

said “That’s about me,”

ticked them all off, and left.

And towards the end,

he'll go in to flip over the tables,

and expel those who are misusing the temple for their own gain...

but that's a little further down the road.

During his short three-year ministry,

Jesus spent a lot of time out and about;

in fields, on hillsides, in homes

and public places...

and now, on the road.

Did you know that the earliest Christians called themselves
 “followers of the way,”
 referring to both the new way they lived,
 and the One who led them on that way?
 The language of travel
 became part of Christian vocabulary
 for talking about spiritual journeying
 early on.

So, for the next few weeks, we’re going to follow Jesus,
 travel with him for a while,
 as he journeys south from Galilee to Jerusalem.
 Along the way, his followers will road-test
 what Jesus has taught them,
 and Jesus will in turn continue to bring
 their still-forming faith and understanding
 into dialogue
 with the people
 and circumstances
 they encounter
 as they
 journey together.

Today, as Jesus is walking and talking with his followers,
 a young expert in the law stands up to talk to him.
 Calling him a lawyer is a little off...
 he’s an expert in Jewish socioreligious law,
 so he’s as much a theologian
 – one who studies what is taught by God –
 as conventional lawyer.

He asks Jesus what he has to do to inherit eternal life.
 Jesus asks him to answer the question himself, which he does:
 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.
 And Jesus agrees.

But the theologian asks a second question: “who is my neighbour?”
 And that question prompts a more complicated answer.
 Jesus does not answer directly;
 instead, this time, he tells a parable, a teaching story.

On the surface, the theologian, the expert in the law,
 is asking a legitimate question about his eternal destiny,
 and a follow-up question about how to live in a way
 that leads to eternal life.

Admittedly, Jesus is currently engaged with much larger concerns;

preparing to defeat death, for example, by his own death on the Cross,
and initiate the kingdom of God here among us.

So the theologian's question about getting eternal life
is kind of off-topic at best and self-centered at worse.

The real problem seems to arise, though,
with his second question:
who is my neighbour?

We might be thinking at this point

that Jesus could have answered him very easily by saying,
your neighbour is everyone, or at least, everyone in need.

But Jesus does not say this...

he tells a parable instead.

So the answer must be more than that.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is popular and well-known to Christians.

But let's review the details briefly:

an affluent Jewish man is mugged and left for dead
on the side of a public roadway.

A priest of his own faith and culture,
the equivalent of a minister or pastor,
sees him and crosses the street
to avoid him.

A Levite comes along next.

Levites were of the same segment of society

that a priest would come from,

but he would not have been a priest himself;

more like an elder or member of a congregation.

He walks around and past the mugged man, too.

Finally, a Samaritan comes along.

Samaritans and Jews did not interact.

History suggests that the Samaritans were descended

from the Jews left behind in Israel

during the Babylonian exile, centuries earlier.

The two groups did not reintegrate

after the nation of Israel

returned to the land.

The long-standing rift between Samaritans and Jews

had devolved into a disagreement over where to worship God;

each group had their own preferred location.

This conflict was old,

and it was unthinkable for a Jew and a Samaritan

to have any positive, friendly contact...

the gulf of history, religion and culture

was thought to be too great to cross.

The Samaritan helps anyway.

What point is Jesus trying to make?

Remember that he's in conversation with an actual person right now,
and that person asked him a question:
who is my neighbour?

This parable might then be Jesus' way of saying
that everyone,
regardless of ethnicity, culture, economic status,
gender, religion (or lack thereof)...
whatever identity they have,
it doesn't matter;
they're your neighbour.

That is part of the answer,

but it's not the most important part.

Because ultimately, it's not about writing
a better definition of neighbour.

A 20th century Biblical scholar said of this conversation

between Jesus and the theologian that,

"one cannot define one's neighbour; one can only be a neighbour."

In the gospels and in our own experience,

Jesus often answers the question

that we should have asked

rather than what we did ask.

And that seems to be what's going on here.

Instead of asking "who is my neighbour,"

the theologian should have asked,

"how can I be a neighbour."

The parable of the Good Samaritan

definitely answers that question.

This is not a trite, bumper-sticker answer that Jesus is giving.

By re-orienting the question,

Jesus is not being witty or clever;

he's proposing a shift in our reality,

in how we view the world and ourselves in it.

The theologian asks his first question

from the position of wanting something

– eternal life – for himself.

This is not a bad thing to want,

and Jesus answers him.

But then the theologian tries to define neighbour,
 to narrow the scope of who he must love...
 because if you can say who your neighbour is,
 then eventually you're going to come across someone who is,
 by definition, not your neighbour.

By telling this parable and spinning the question around,
 Jesus is suggesting that the theologian's mindset,
 his way of understanding the world as a person of faith,
 is incorrect.
 It's not a matter of working out
 which category of neighbour
 someone else fits into,
 but knowing which category
 he fits into.

Who was a neighbour in the parable?
 Was the theologian going to be a neighbour?
 Are we neighbours?

There is room here for personal reflection on your spiritual journey.
 If you're feeling that tug on the heart that is the Spirit of God,
 if you're feeling stuck in the twisting leap Jesus makes
 from "who is my neighbour" to "am I a neighbour,"
 then I encourage you to tuck that away in your mind,
 and spend some time with it and in prayer,
 maybe after lunch today.

For now, though, let's reflect together
 on what Jesus is saying
 as it might apply to us as a congregation,
 as a troop of Jesus' followers,
 fellow travellers with him on this stretch of road.

Like the theologian, I wonder if we may be asking our questions incorrectly,
 from the perspective of wanting something for ourselves.
 If Jesus were walking along beside us,
 some of our questions might be,
 "what must we do to sway people to church?"
 What must we do to see an increase
 in Christian faith among people around us?
 What must we do to help people
 turn toward Jesus and follow him?"

These are not bad things to want.

I suspect Jesus would answer us with v.27:

“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.”

Inevitably, I think our next questions
would be something like

“okay...who should we approach? What
program or ministry will work? How do we
get them in the door on Sunday?”

I fear that Jesus would, as he did with the theologian,
answer the question we should have asked instead:
are we neighbours? How can we be neighbours?

Jesus answers that question, too, so it must be a right one.

He says, show mercy.

Mercy is an attribute of God,
and of course that means Jesus too.

Mercy is giving graciously beyond what is deserved...
the Cross and our forgiveness
are the culmination,
the greatest expression
of God's mercy.

Mercy is also kind and compassionate treatment,
seeing suffering, being moved by it,
and trying to make it better.

There is a lot of room for mercy here in Sarnia.

Part of familiarising myself with my new home
has been exploring the good things about Sarnia,
but also informing myself about the hard things.
Lambton County did a preliminary analysis
of homelessness in 2018,
to try and unpick its causes and patterns.

I'm going to give you a few numbers to mull over.

Of those interviewed who were homeless,
only 30% were accommodated in emergency shelters;
a full 42% were in some kind of temporary accommodation,
be it hospital, jail or “couch surfing,”
which is just as precarious and unsustainable
as any other form of homeless shelter.

Many were homeless because they couldn't afford their rent,
 even though 56% were receiving social assistance benefits
 through Ontario Works.

Addiction and poor mental health
 were unsurprisingly significant causes
 for homelessness...

but 15% had walked away from their home
 because of conflict or abuse.

And 54% were homeless
 in 2018
 for the first time ever.

Both Lambton County and our cities and towns are working on how to help,
 both immediately and in the long-term,
 and to address the underlying causes
 of the sharp increase in homelessness.

And that's good that they are,
 but...as the people of God,
 this task has belonged to us for a lot longer.
 Please take out your Bibles and turn again to
 Deuteronomy 15:7-11.
 READ.

Being good neighbours has been part of our Christian tradition
 for over 7000 years.

It's the bedrock of how God defines justice and love,
 the foundation of our story as Christians.

If people are going to consider Christianity,
 the first text they read is not likely
 to be the Bible...it's going to be us.
 The church.

And we have a share in the writing of God's story here in Sarnia today.

Being a good neighbour the way Jesus teaches is not without risk.

Risk of rejection, of awkward social encounters, of embarrassment;
 risk of failure and challenged faith;
 risk of crossing boundaries
 – of ethnicity, culture, economic status, gender,
 and religion (or lack thereof) –
 these are serious risks.

But Scripture and Christ himself

challenge us to take those risks and go be neighbours,
soft hearts and open hands extended.

I began by reminding you of a question from a couple of weeks ago:
If Jesus came again as quietly and humbly as he did in Bethlehem,
would we be in position to be among the first to know?

We believe that whenever and wherever we gather as Christians,
when we pray and worship God in a Christ-centered way,
he is there.
And that's absolutely true.

But when Jesus was here on earth,
living and breathing and teaching among us,
he showed his followers how to follow him,
how to walk the way;
Jesus challenged their faith to help it grow,
and he did it by taking them out onto the roads
and into the communities
through which they travelled.

Jesus was there, with them all the way;
he is waiting for us out there, too. Amen.