

Pentecost 5
10/7/2022

Mark the Evangelist

Leviticus 19:1-4, 9-1
Psalm 82
Luke 10:25-37

God, our loving enemy

*In a sentence:
God's love is strange to us but just the love we need.*

The best stories invite us into them, causing us to identify with some of the characters and enabling us to see *ourselves* as part of what is happening. In a good thriller, it is “me” who is about to walk into the room in which awaits the psychopathic killer with his ridiculously long, serrated-edged knife. In a good love story, it is “me” who gets the girl or the guy (depending on your preference!). The best stories enable *us* to be the hero, the victim, the lover, or whatever; what happens to the players in the story is what happens to *us*. A good story is *our* story.

Our gospel reading this morning presents us with stories on two different levels. First, there is the story of an encounter between Jesus and one of the religious experts of his day – a religious lawyer. Second, as part of that first story, there is another story about a man mugged on a dangerous road. The fact that we still tell these two stories nearly 2000 years after they were first told suggests that these are *good* stories. And so we might wonder, Where are *we* in the two inter-mingled stories of our gospel reading?

Consider the first-level story of the encounter between the religious lawyer and Jesus. Most of us are humble enough *not* to imagine that we are Jesus in the story. These are told about Jesus because the church has long thought that he is the supreme Good Guy. Even people who don't confess Christian faith would hesitate to imagine themselves as Jesus here. However, this leaves us with a problem. If Jesus is the good guy, and the lawyer is *challenging* Jesus, then the lawyer is kind of the *bad* guy! That is hardly acceptable either. We don't want to be identified with Jesus' opponents, especially if we've heard these stories so often that we know we should be on Jesus' side. At worst, we can only admit to being a *little* like the religious lawyer. This leaves an open question about who we are at this story level. We are not Jesus but also don't want to be the religious lawyer who gets it wrong.

Let's look then at the second level of the story – the tale of the man mugged and left beside the road. Here we might identify with the robbers, the religious leaders who ignore the man in need, the Samaritan who helped him, the man himself robbed and beaten, the innkeeper, and perhaps even the Samaritan's donkey!

It's still not easy to place ourselves here but what we think this story is told *for* will indicate to us who we *really* believe ourselves to be in the story. So, what *is* the story told for? Typically, we read this as a *moral* tale. The moral, it would seem, is that “we should love one another”, or “*they* should love one another”, if we think someone else needs to hear the story more than we do. The final remark of Jesus is, “Go, and do as he did”. This *is* an important lesson. Do not do as the robbers, the priest or the Levite did; do as the Samaritan did. Who, then, does this moral reading suggest *we* are in the story? Probably not the Samaritan and probably not the robbers. Perhaps we are a *little* like those religious leaders who should have helped but did not. Still, as with the first level of the story, it's a bit of an open question. We may believe we are only a *little* like those

Jesus criticises here but we can't fully identify with them. It's too difficult to criticise ourselves in that way.

Let's consider now one further story level: the whole gospel story of Jesus. This seems to cast us and Jesus in very clear roles. The gospel encapsulates both the story-levels of Jesus and the lawyer, and the Samaritan and the beaten man. It does this by casting *God* in the role of the Samaritan, and *us* in the role of the man robbed and beaten and left by the road to die. This is a typically "religious" reading of the parable. The *moral* lesson about loving those around us becomes a *religious* lesson about God's love for us. For some of us this extension beyond the moral lesson is a comforting one. But, of course, if you don't think you *need* comfort, it's not so impressive. And this brings us to "the twist".

If one element of a good story is that it invites us to find ourselves in its characters, another element is the unexpected twist – the surprising turn which catches us off guard, and also catches our breath, causing us to stop and to reconsider what we always thought must be the case. The twist *here* is that the Samaritan *is* a Samaritan. This itself has a meaning – he doesn't just *happen* to come from Samaria. It is of critical importance that he is what the Jews of the time considered a heretic from the North, and someone those same Jews refused to have dealings with.

This leads to an unexpected discovery about God's approach to us. If we are the *Jewish* victim lying on the road, and if God-in-Jesus is the Samaritan, then Jesus comes to us as a stranger we would actually reject, perhaps even attack, if we were not too weak to get ourselves up out of the gutter. To put it more strongly, Jesus comes to us as one we might even think of as our *enemy*. And yet he is, in fact, the only source of help for us.

This has wide-reaching – and troubling – consequences for what we might expect from the world. In the stories of our lives, we develop naturally a sense that we know what is wrong, a sense that we know what we need, and a sense of who might be able to deliver it. Certainly, we also have an idea of who would *not* be able to deliver it. But if the story of the Good Samaritan can be read as the story of *God* coming to aid us *in the form of the scorned Samaritan*, then our thoughts about what we might expect in our lives are thrown into disarray. If we are lying on the roadside, then those individuals or things we might have expected to have assisted us are shown to be worthless – our own strength or good sense to avoid the attack in the first place, and then the priest and the Levite as those we might have relied upon for help. Instead, in the hour of need, only this stranger, this foreign heretic, comes to assist. God's love is a strange love – precisely what we need, but not what we would have expected. It lifts and restores and yet comes from the most unexpected of sources. (As an aside: perhaps this matters for our own future accommodations thinking).

Our gospel reading today hinges on the lawyer's question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" It is easy to reject that question today, if we imagine ourselves to have outgrown such religious worries. It is easy to misunderstand the question, particularly for the religious who've developed a certain way of understanding what "eternal life" is. And in both cases it is easy to miss the *answer* Jesus gives to the question, because we think we know what "love" is when we hear Jesus tell us to love our neighbour. Only when we know ourselves as loved – when we have been the poor soul beaten and left by the side of the road *and been surprised to discover love from the most unexpected of sources* – only then will we begin to know what it is to be called to love others... (Again, perhaps this has relevance for what we could expect in our next steps as a congregation).

The gospel is story of “love unknown.” It’s unknown because it runs deeper than any other love we have known, and so is strange to us. But though a strange love, it *is* love. It is the love of God for a world which considers him strange, foreign, perhaps even an enemy. And yet it is love which will not be denied. *If we seek love* – love for ourselves and the capacity to love others – our starting place is by the side of the road, receiving the love of the God who offers it when all other love fails.

This is love: that God loved us, in order that we might know how to love.

May the God who once loved us in his Good Samaritan, Jesus the Christ, surprise us again with his amazing love, and make of us surprising lovers.
