

THE SAMARITAN

Amos 7:7-17

Luke 10:25-37

I suppose edging up on the dog days of summer
is as good a time as any
to squirm beneath the standard for doing right
set for the moment
uncomfortably beside
the standard for doing grace;

or maybe,
for those with eyes to see
and ears to hear,
they are always set side by side:
the standard for doing right
and the standard for doing grace.

"I have seen a vision of a plumb line set in your midst,"
said the prophet to the people of God.

A plumb line is nothing more than a string
with a weight on the end
which a builder holds beside a wall
to be the standard
for straight up and down.

"I have seen a vision of a plumb line set in your midst,"
said the prophet to the people of God.

"Against that plumb line
God will judge what you do that is right
and what you do that is wrong;
what you do that is faithful;
and what you do that is faithless;
what you do that is true;
and what you do that is false.

"Against that plumb line,"
said the prophet,
"there is no margin for error...
I repeat,
no margin for error."

Other places

the prophet talks of forgiveness;
but not here...
not in the context of the plumb line.

Then,
more than half a millennium later,

"Who is my neighbor?"
the lawyer asked Jesus.

Jesus told the lawyer the story of the Good Samaritan;
and no one doesn't know the story of the Good Samaritan
only the Bible doesn't call him good.
The church added the adjective;
and what the Samaritan did
has become the standard for doing grace.

Wonder if the standard for doing right
and the standard for doing grace
should always be seen side by side:

Do right;
Do faithfulness;
Do truth
all on one side.

And just beside:

Do grace...
extravagantly.

Maybe that's the way it should always be.

Listen to this.

According to the way I remember hearing the episode,
it happened about mid-afternoon of an uncommonly hot day
not unlike the days we've commonly had of late.

Heat rose off the supermarket parking lot
like the fumes of a perdition
and sent what few diehard shoppers there were
slow-treading to their cars
like tired mules
maneuvering the rows of a wasted corn field.

A rather worn-down and portly African American woman
of the age to be a grandmother
made her way with a loaded shopping cart

to an old ratty blue Buick
with one scavenged yellow fender barely attached.
The head liner sagging.
One child was in the shopping cart.
Another was clinging to her skirt.
She must have been their grandmother.

The only colorful spot in the wasteland
was a young European American woman
fashionably dressed in tennis togs.
A small bag of groceries was under her arm.
With her free hand, she held a child of six or seven in tow.

Just as the tennis-tog woman reached her Suburban station wagon
and the worn-down grandmother reached her Buick,
there erupted a few yards away
a brutal shouting match
of a sure and certain domestic nature.

A hard-living white couple
came out of the supermarket
cursing each other and shouting at the top of their voices.

My friend who told the tale
and a half dozen other people were on hand
to witness the sad drama.

When the fashionable woman
with groceries in hand and child in tow
saw and heard what was happening,
she quickly unlocked the Suburban,
got her child and herself inside
and locked the doors behind them...click.

The grandmother likewise hurried her charges
into the safety of the Buick...click.

At that precise moment,
the shouting match turned the more violent.
The man struck the woman full across the face
and sent her sprawling on the hot pavement.
With skin scraped from several places
about her head, hands, and knees
and a trickle of blood emerging from the corner of her mouth,
the poor woman got up
and ran in a limping gait toward the Suburban.
Her attacker
was in lumbering and heated pursuit.
The badly beaten woman
frantically knocked on the window of the Suburban

pleading for a place of safety.

With a shake of her head
and a despairing lift of her hands,
the tennis-tog woman denied admission
and the engine of the Suburban roared to life.

Just then the door of the Buick swung open.
The portly worn-down grandmother emerged
now come to full life and energy.

With her black arm
she grabbed the beaten woman
and pushed her into the on the driver's side of the Buick
and slammed the door.

She then stood firmly in front of the closed door
between the attacker and his victim
with a hand firmly planted on each of her considerable hips;
whereupon
the attacker put both hands in his pockets
and lowered his head.

My friend and several other bystanders
gathered about
to assure there would be no further acts of violence
until the police arrived.

Meanwhile,
the Suburban circled the parking lot once
and returned to the scene.
The person inside lowered the window
and said to the assembled crowd,

"I was afraid of what might happen to my daughter."

"Nothing so harmful as the lesson you have taught her,"
said my idealistic friend in disgust'
as she echoed my own hard thoughts on the subject.

And yet...
And yet
we do understand...
don't we?

I've heard one of the first lessons taught to rookie police officers
is to be cautious when they get involved in a domestic fight.
In all honesty and candor,

if it had been one of our daughters
responsible for a child in that parking lot,
I would have been relieved
to see her exercise such caution;
likewise a son if we had one.

The child's safety
really was the matter of priority concern.
It may make us all sad and angry beyond measure
at the state of affairs that put her in such a circumstance;
but no one...not one can blame her.

Just so,
in the story of the Good Samaritan,
almost all experts now agree,
no one in the hearing of Jesus when he told the story
and no one who first read Luke's account of the story
was surprised in the least
that the priest and the Levite
passed by on the other side...

sad and disappointed perhaps;
but neither shocked nor surprised.²
The real shock was to come later in the story.

You remember the story of the Good Samaritan, I'm sure.
A lawyer asked Jesus how to obtain eternal life.
Though there is no evidence of hostility,
it was a trick question,
so Jesus turned the table
and asked the lawyer what the law says on the subject.
The lawyer answered
with the well-known joining of two laws:
love God and love neighbor.

On that,
Jesus and the lawyer agreed
only Jesus added the caveat
that the lawyer must do the law
and not just know the law.
The lawyer then pushed the matter
by asking Jesus to define neighbor
whereupon Jesus told the now famous story
of the Good Samaritan,
only, as I said earlier,
we call him good while
Jesus only called him a Samaritan.
It was enough to make the point unmistakable.

The story goes

like this:

On his way from Jerusalem to Jericho,
a man,
presumably a Jew,
was beaten, robbed and left for dead.

At intervals,
a priest and a Levite,
both religious leaders,
passed by on the other side.

As I said,

no matter how much preaching to the contrary you have heard
and I have preached,
neither Jesus' listeners
nor Luke's readers would have been shocked
by their reaction...
disappointed, perhaps,
but not shocked.

The shocking surprise

was yet to come.

As the story continues,
a Samaritan not only stopped to help,
the Samaritan went to extravagant lengths in helping:
Bound the wounds;
Provided transportation;
Provided lodging;
Promised to return;
all at an extravagant cost.

Little wonder the church calls him good.

It's hard for us to grasp the enmity

between first-century Jews and first-century Samaritans;
but it's safe to say

it is at least equal to the current enmity between Jews and Palestinians;
or equal to the enmity held by some former employees and investors in Enron
who rue the fact that Ken Lay died before he could spend time in prison.

That's hate.

This is the stuff of

a Hatfield helping a McCoy in western North Carolina;
a Jet helping a Shark in West Side Story;

a Capulet helping a Montague in Romeo and Juliet;
but more than that
and much more real:

This is the real life stuff of

a Protestant helping a Catholic in Northern Ireland;
a Jew helping a neo-Nazi in Germany or a Palestinian in Israel;
a Serb helping a Croat in Eastern Europe;
a Tutsi helping Hutu in Central Africa;
a member of the Aryan Nation helping an ATF agent
in Montana;
Or a US Marine helping an Iraqi insurgent in Bagdad.

This is only a partial list.

There's a lot of hate wafting about our world
like a sultry and sinister breeze;
but even from the partial list
you get the picture;

and, once you get over the shock of it all,
you soon begin to get the even bigger picture...

the picture of some great and eternal truth...
the picture that it is only such acts
of unlikely and extravagant grace
that have a chance at bringing healing
to our most gaping wounds.

Devilish thing I did this morning,
don't you agree?

Beside the plumb line
setting the standard of right and wrong,
faith and faithless;
truth and lie,
I put the standard for the grace we must do
if there is to be healing.

I got the idea from the Lectionary which,
when it lists these texts,
groups them just so.

In a day when so little is known of our Bible stories,
it is difficult to say
any one of them is too well known.

This one, however, gets very close
to crossing that line.

There are laws named for the Good Samaritan
which protect people from lawsuits
who stop to render aid.
There is a well-known charity
named for the Samaritan's purse.
There are awards given out in schools
that are likewise named for the Samaritan;
and the list goes on.
The danger in such familiarity
is that the real point of the story might be missed.

The story, for example,
is not a prescription
for how we should carry out acts of charity.
As a matter of fact,
the leaders of most urban congregation I know,
and I suspect it is true for this one,
strongly recommend that you not give cash
to needy people who approach asking for assistance.
Of course, there are instances
when to do so is the right thing
and, when confronted with such situations,
we must each one make the decision of what to do;
but the truth is,
in almost all instances,
the church,
with its own resources
and in cooperation with other churches and agencies
has in place ways we
can provide more healing expressions of grace
than giving a few dollars in the parking lot.

Nor is this mostly a story
about hypocrisy among church leaders.
As serious and rampant as that problem no doubt is,
this is not the best text to address it
lest in doing so
the real punch of the text be obscured.

The text is mostly about extravagant grace
coming from unlikely quarters
and the healing such unlikely and extravagant grace brings.

When the most recent division in the Presbyterian Church took place,
I was serving a middle size congregation in a small town
in the panhandle of Florida.

For quite some time
Presbytery meetings had been tense.
Finally on the day of division,
when a number of congregations
would be leaving our beloved denomination,
trumped up charges and counter charges were leveled,
harsh words were exchanged;
bitterness was palpable
and, by day's end,
the vote was taken
and division was real.

It was by far the saddest and most bitter day
of my ministry.

I continue to believe
it was an unnecessary division
based largely on lies and counter lies.
We dare not repeat the faithless tragedy.

As it happened,
not many weeks after that,
a couple having dinner at our home
got a frantic call from their babysitter
saying their infant was in distress.

I drove them home at breakneck speed.
From there I drove them with equal speed
to our little hospital emergency room
and from there,
at the doctor's strong urging,
I drove them,
again at equal speed,
to a regional medical center in Pensacola some 150 miles away.

It was long before EMS became nearly as sophisticated and available
as it is today.

Finally,
at about 3:00 a.m.,
with the baby stabilized and grandparents on the scene,
I took my leave.

Only then,
walking through the hospital lobby,
knowing we had come into the parking lot of the hospital
on little more than prayer and gas fumes,
I realized in the rush to leave home
I had left without my wallet
and thus had neither cash nor credit card
with which to buy gasoline.

When I turned to find a seat from which to ponder my predicament,
there, coming down the hall as if on cue,
was one of my most ardent adversaries
from the ill-fated Presbytery meeting.

He was in the hospital at such an unlikely hour
to call on a desperately ill member of his congregation.

You must know,
that our respective vocabularies are reasonably sophisticated
is all that kept the names we had called each other just a few days before
from being vulgar.

Not only that,
he thought terrible things about me
and about things I hold to be of ultimate importance;

and I about him.

We greeted each other,
and exchanged a few halfhearted and tired niceties.

Finally,
I mustered enough courage to tell him my plight.

Without the least hesitation,
he loaned me \$20.00 for gasoline.

I thanked him
and turned to go out into the night.

As I was starting the car,
I looked and saw him running across the parking lot.

"Wait," he said.

"Take my VISA Card just in case you have car trouble
or want to stop and get something to eat."

Healing took place.

The church was not reunited.

My opinion of his position
and his opinion of mine did not change;
but healing took place.

Just think of it:

Alongside the measure of right behavior,
faithfulness
and truth telling,

we have set,
at least for today,

the measure of just such healing grace
as happened in the hospital parking lot.
It is the standard of what we must do.

There is no alternative;
It is the grace we *must* do.

You didn't forget that Jesus added that caveat, did you?
Just like we must not only know the law,
we must do it,
just so,
we must not only know the Samaritan's grace,
we must do it.

By doing such grace
there will be healing.

James S. Lowry
Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church
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END NOTES

1

. This is an adaptation of a story I heard at Morning Prayers some considerable time ago at the Mount Pleasant Church. Shirley Hendrix is the person who told the story. Whether she observed the episode or reported having heard of it, I cannot remember. I do remember that the editorial comment was hers.

². Fred Craddock, *Luke* from the Interpretation Series, John Knox, 1990 (149 f); Cousar *et al*, *Tests for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV -- Year C*, Westminster/John Knox, 1994 (426 f); Robert C. Tannehill, *Luke* from Abingdon New Testament Commentaries, Abingdon, 1996 (181 f).