

## THE EIGHTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST (PROPER 10C)

*Deuteronomy 30:9-14, Psalm 25:1-9, Luke 10:25-37*

July 10, 2016

St. Mark's-in-the-Valley Episcopal Church, Los Olivos, California

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# And who is my neighbor?

Generous God, you give us gifts and make them grow: though our faith is often small as a mustard seed, make it rise to your glory and the flourishing of your reign on earth as in your eternal realm; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

*Based on the Additional Collects, The Church of England*

The *Book of Common Prayer* suggests four days of the church year as “especially appropriate” for baptism and also suggests reserving baptism to those four days only. On paper, those suggestions make sense, but, in my experience, have never been practical.

So, in my pastoral leadership over the past three decades, I’ve typically welcomed people to baptism pretty much any Sunday, usually skipping the church seasons of Advent and Lent.

What I’ve discovered is it does us all good to be reminded of our baptism, our essential identity in the world, throughout the year and often when we least expect it – like showing up here and discovering that Nora Marie Dietrich is being baptized today.

And there are times that we find ourselves being drawn into baptism when there is nothing

better we can possibly do – as today – when this action comes in stark contrast with what is happening in the world around us..., which can be most any time, but occasionally the horrors, like the violence unleashed in Minnesota, Louisiana, and Texas this week, bring us to consciousness in ways that we typically avoid.

Perhaps what is unhinging for us is the increasing sense that nowhere is there an escape or a norm that does not include irrational hatreds erupting in brutality and murder. Levels of fear, reactivity and regressive language and acting out continue to escalate – so that “active shooter” has come into our natural vocabulary and the experience of aggressive intimidation in talk and other behavior is now a backdrop to everyday life, including the phenomenon of this year’s

presidential election.

We arrive here to affirm a confidence in undying love and the hope that arises from who God is for us and for all people and for the totality of the created order. We embrace and share the reconciliation of God with every person and the natural world.

But what is distinctive about what we do in baptism, is bringing our whole selves, our best selves and worst selves, what we dream about as our potential as well as our inevitable vulnerability, failings, losses and deaths. The totality of who we are, our compassion and our violence, are embraced and inhabited by God... our light and our darkness, our best expressions of who we are as well as our shadow sides.

Jesus did not live an idealized human life in an idealized world, encountering only the potential of the best and the brightest. He was, in a sense, brutalized and gunned-down and so knows, as we do, who we are, what we are experiencing at close range, with us, not distant in any way.

We come to one of the best-known passages of scripture in the Christian testament, the parable of the Good Shepherd. We may not grasp the impact of what Jesus was revealing in this passage, especially if we see only a superficial “do-goodism” in it.

The lawyer in the story answered his own initial question – which was “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” He is asking how to get what he wants. That question is, in itself, coming out of a mindset very different from that of Jesus the Christ. The lawyer has a very narrowly “religious” and a consumerist view and sees a behavior and reward system, quite foreign to the mind of Christ – but one that has always been propagated in institutional religion.

But Jesus goes along with him and says he has answered his own question well: Love God; love your neighbor as yourself.

But the lawyer, perhaps knowing he is not going to rise to that broad and life-changing call goes to particulars and hopes to shave away some obligation, or the outsize scale of this vision of God for humanity, for the world: “And who is my neighbor?” he counters.

He reminds me of a cartoon I saw recently of a committee, perhaps a vestry, sitting around a table with one person saying: “we’re hoping you’ll lead us on a journey of transformation without requiring any real changes.” We go for the status quo – homeostasis – even when it’s killing us.

“Who is my neighbor?” is the question being asked.

As Jesus tells this parable, another attempt to blow up our set

patterns of thinking and acting, he places in the crucial role someone who would have been abhorred by his audience. The person who reached across the boundaries, who responded to a shared, common humanity, was someone who would have been loathed by those listening to Jesus.

Samaritans were a religious and ethnic group who grew out of the root source of the Judaism practiced by the majority of Jews but who were separated geographically at one point and developed different practices and interpretations of scriptural texts and, in their minority status, were segregated from both religion and society.

You can think of almost anyone who really and truly vexes you, frightens you or disturbs you: THAT person is your “good” Samaritan: anyone from whom you would rather die than accept help – someone you might see coming towards you in the ditch and you’re hoping and praying they aren’t going to notice you, dire as your circumstances are at that moment.

That unsavory character is the person Jesus says is your neighbor.

And Jesus does up the ante in this parable by implying that you would not be separate but equal – no, this is someone who will be strong and resourceful and

compassionate to help YOU when you are none of those things.... Can you – can any of us – engage on that level of participation with the whole of humanity?

It’s more than a tall order. It seems like something we simply can’t do, but I think it is part of the possibility inherent in the life of the baptized. Baptism is not insurance, protection, cutting off from real life but a freedom to move most deeply into the world that God so loves – the world that both delights and disappoints, that inspires and frightens, that brings forth life and destroys it.

Baptism takes us away from being either Pollyannas or demagogues.

And yes, we may be the ones to cross the boundaries, to breach the barricades of tradition, comfort, socially-acceptable custom to not just smile at but truly assist the person who is “other” – the odd, unattractive, difficult and very different.

Who is my neighbor?

Who is *our* neighbor?

From whom will you accept hospitality; to whom will you – will we - extend it? This parable is what makes having open doors here imperative – and what drives us to expand our service in the world – so we have a context for engaging, connecting with people who would otherwise, in our view, be foreigners to us.

Can we grow in the vision Jesus offers us in this comfort-shattering parable? The vision that calls us to be brave and to accept risks?

Jesus is about changing lives – everyone’s – and ours and about changing the world. Beginning with “who is my neighbor?” or “who is in the ditch?” or “who is with us in the ditch?” or “who is picking us up and taking care of us?” – are we ready for the massive change and expansion of our vision – of our lived life experience as we go the way, engage the whole truth, accept the never-complacent, never settled life of Jesus who is Christ?

Here is the essence of baptism, our true selves, our deepest identity individually and together – into which we welcome Nora today – that we all live every day – our best days and our worst.



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