

Sermon: Luke 10: 25-37

Title: **For this is how we love our neighbour as we love ourselves.**

Rev. Sharon Smith

At a recent leadership training event, we sat in a circle around the room. And the group was invited to introduce themselves by telling us that makes them unique.

The facilitator started – he gave his name and told us that he did carpentry on the side.

The second person, told us their name, named their marriage partner, children, where they lived, their hobby and that they owned a dog.

The third person followed the same pattern – marriage partner, children, address, hobby and pet.

After the fourth and fifth person, there was no going back. The pattern was so ingrained that a few members actually divulged stories you wouldn't usually share in an introduction.

- I have no pets, I am allergic to dogs.
- I have no children, I had several miscarriages.
- I am widowed, my partner died young.

I have thought about that moment so much.

Realizing that when we list what makes us unique or special.

At the same time, the list separates me from others.

What creates belonging, can also create separation.

Who is my neighbour? Jesus is asked.

And Jesus tells a parable.

Now a parable is in the tradition of rabbinic *meshalim* short narrative fictions (these could be in the form of a riddle, a proverb or a sentence of the wise).

What made a parable unique is that it transferred a new way of seeing onto an ordinary situation.

When Jesus launched into a parable. The audience became deeply uncomfortable.

Jesus subtly re-described reality.

So a very brave lawyer (well versed in Jewish law – representative of a largely Jewish audience) asks Jesus a question to test him.

As with each of us, this question asker is coming from a particular social perspective:

In the ancient Mediterranean world everyone had a social map that defined the individual's place in the world. This social map told these people who they were, who they were related to, how to react, and how to behave.

- At the centre of the map was the family – especially the father
- Then came the Village
- Finally came the city and beyond
- To the ends of the earth.

It gave him a fixed point of identity from which to determine - what is good, what is bad, what is right and what is wrong. Which side is up and which side is down.

He would have been raised in a world that divided.

- himself from the Gentiles
- and from the Samaritans.

His Israelite identity was forged around us good, gentile bad, Samaritan bad.
Us right, Gentile and Samaritan Wrong.

He so would have been raised to treat Samaritan's with disgust.

A First Century proverb states: "He that eats the bread of the Samaritans is like the one that eats the flesh of swine"

These cultural lines when drawn, became assumed and formed part of the accepted norm.
Not questioned. Simply the way things were.

Now then a parable, Bernard Brendon Scott

And so Jesus tells a parable.

A parable about a journey from Jerusalem to Jericho where these dividing lines are severely challenged and called into question.

I pause here to think about our assumptions and our dividing lines.

Things that make us unique, that help us belong, may also divide me from others.

We may say:

- I am Canadian, not American.
- I was born in Canada, not a new immigrant.
- I am a woman... not a man
- Straight... not gay.
- Married... not divorced, not single.

- I am an Anglican Christian... not a conservative evangelical

Uniqueness is good - how we hold each of these defining parts of ourselves determines our relationship with others.

Mostly we may not even be aware that we hold identities so tight that they may actually be excluding others.

Jesus' hearers are presented with a tragic story.

A traveller sets out on the 17 mile journey between Jerusalem and Jericho – desert and rocky hill country (hideout for bandits)

This scenario is usual and doesn't surprise anyone – it happens all the time.

We don't know the man's identity. We know little about him.

And this mirrors the story – for he is stripped and left for dead:

The stripping - no clothes, leaves him with no identity clues – no class clues, no village/nation clues (identity related to social layers)

In the story, he is just as we encounter him – anonymous.

Anonymous people – leave us feeling a bit helpless.

What is it about us, that needs to know something about people to trust them?

And the stripping opens up the idea that all these external messages are just an illusion.

For every human being is a self so deeply embodied in their being.

This stripped man invites me to question the layers of my dividing assumptions.

The story continues...

A Priest... a Levite... and a... Samaritan.

Now I want you to hear these words as if you were hearing the words:

- Friends, Romans, Countrymen
- And they had been changed to Friends, Greeks, Countrymen...

- Or Ladies & Gentleman changed to Ladies & Lesbians...

For this first century lawyer schooled in Jewish Law – he would be used to the address:

- Priests, Levites, Israelites.

And Jesus changes the pattern.

The Samaritan becomes the central figure – the hero.

The Israelite hearer is now in a dilemma – who do I identify with – an anonymous human, half dead?

Or a hero who is one of *them, an enemy?*

Cynthia Bourgeault in her book *the Wisdom of Jesus*, writes that Jesus' parables deliberately take us beyond our egoic being.

And by this she means that part of us that separates us from everything else, that particular operating system that determines my belonging and others' exclusion, what determines me as an insider and others as outsiders.

The part of me that divides the world up – placing me at the centre.
Jesus calls us beyond this illusion.

Jesus does in this parable, in this story, what the Spirit of Christ does in our lives.
In our lived stories.

It takes a shift, some big, some small event, to move us beyond to relate out of the deeper, more truest part of ourselves.

From that part that the Hebrew scriptures call 'the heart'.

A centred place not determined by family system, job, marital status or nationality.

We often sense it when life gets a bit shaky, and we are stripped of something:

- We lose a partner – we move from being a we to a me; from an us to a me.
- We lose a job or we retire – and we can no longer identify ourselves by what we do
- We get an illness – and we are no longer in control at the centre.

Or we can intentionally shift – by placing ourselves in situations that call our illusive identities into question:

- Foreign films
- Books written by other cultured authors
- Friendships outside of our comfort zones – maybe with a new neighbour...

These become invitations to see with the eyes of the heart.

To dig deeper for meaning.

Invitations to be stripped down.

To encounter our true selves and open up to the other.

For this, my friends, is how we love our neighbour as we love ourselves.