



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School
1611 E Main St., Watertown, WI 53094

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, July 14, 2019



Vincent Van Gogh—The Good Samaritan (after Delacroix), Oil on canvas, 1890, Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, The Netherlands.

A note about the painting of the Good Samaritan by Vincent Van Gogh

Notice how Van Gogh shows what a messy business it is to help someone. These two men are entangled, much closer than men like to be. The Samaritan has to use all the strength he has . . . in his ankles, calves, hips, back, arms and hands to hoist this man on to his donkey. He's even using his neck and face to push the man into place.

The artist, Vincent Van Gogh was tormented by mental illness. (Van Gogh was the one who cut off his own ear.) He had become so sick, out of control and difficult that the people in Arles (where he was living) called him "the red-headed madman" and all but forced him out of town. A protestant pastor accompanied him to southern France and on May 8, 1889, helped Van Gogh admit himself into an asylum in Saint-Remy. Asylums back then were more like secure holding centers (prisons) for the mentally ill than places of compassionate care and treatment. But Van Gogh *was* allowed two cells. Both had barred windows looking out over cornfields, vineyards and olive trees. One cell he used as his bedroom, the other as a tiny studio. He painted this scene while in the asylum. Van Gogh knew what it was like to be left on the side of the road. He also knew the grace of the Good Samaritan. (Previously, Van Gogh had served as a protestant missionary in southern Belgium.)

Whenever there's a Van Gogh exhibit, often there will be gag gifts in the museum's gift shop poking fun at his illness. For example, coffee mugs with an ear for a handle, gummy ears, etc., turning a profit by mocking someone's illness. I don't believe the Lord gets a laugh out of that kind of humor. In our Old Testament lesson, we read, "You shall not curse the deaf, nor put a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall fear your God: I am the Lord" (Lev. 19:14).

Jesus does not mock our maladies or illnesses, or laugh at them. He has compassion on us. With strong arms he lifts us up from our broken condition. He rescues us and cares for us. Henri Nouwen wrote, "Our brokenness has no other beauty but the beauty that comes from the compassion that surrounds it."

Pastor Groth

Collect: Lord Jesus Christ, in Your deep compassion You rescue us from whatever may hurt us. Teach us to love You above all things and to love our neighbors, as ourselves; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

“A Messy Business”

Rev. David K. Groth

July 14, 2019

Parable of the Good Samaritan – Luke 10:25-37

Here’s a man who is prepared to argue with Jesus. He’s hoping to do a little theological fencing with the young rabbi from Nazareth. He’s been trained in philosophy and debate and knows the usual rhetorical tricks. He has some Scripture committed to memory, enough to twist and turn it to fit his needs. He’s a slippery one. He’s rubbed his inner man with butter so that no one can get a good grip on him. And now he’s standing before Jesus with a question: “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life.” He dangles the question out there like a feather in front of a young cat.

But Jesus isn’t in a playful mood. “What does the Law say?” he asks. The lawyer is disappointed. He wants to have a peer to peer theological tussle, but instead, Jesus makes this lawyer feel like a schoolboy again. The lawyer knows the answer to his own question. He memorized it as a boy in the synagogue, and he sounds like that boy as he recites the passage: “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.” “Do this, and you will live” Jesus says. That is, keep the law, and you will inherit eternal life.

The lawyer has never liked that message because he’s never been able to keep the law. It’s impossible. After all, who can love his neighbor as himself? Who can love God with all his heart, soul, strength and mind? The law has a way of chewing us up and spitting us out as failures. Besides, all the lawyer wanted was to have some fun with Jesus, some give and take, back and

forth, maybe impress the others standing around, but Jesus won't come out and play.

Just then, another thought, another question enters the lawyer's mind. It says, "Love your neighbor as yourself. But who really is my neighbor?" A clever question, right? Is it just the people living in the house next door? Or does it include others: the cashier downtown? The man whose house was damaged by wind one village over? The child who doesn't have enough to eat up in Damascus? Is my neighbor only the person I know, or does it also include the stranger? Are my neighbors only among the faithful, or also among unbelievers? Do I also have to help neighbors who got to where they're at because of their own bad decisions?

The lawyer chuckles to himself. There are no real clean answers to these questions with chapter and verse to point to, so Jesus won't be able to wiggle out of them so easily. He'll never be able to tell me who is and isn't my neighbor. Besides, there's a nice little benefit to uncertainty here. So long as it is unclear who my neighbor is, then I'm not obliged to love that person as myself. I'm not obliged to enter into his problems. I'm not obliged to serve him, give money to him, or even talk to him, because it's just not clear who is and is not my neighbor.

Once again, Jesus doesn't play by the rules. He refuses to spoon feed this man answers. Instead he teaches him and us how to think by telling him a simple little story, a parable. It's just seven verses long, but what a wallop, whether for the high powered lawyer in front of him 2000 years ago, or the preschoolers downstairs today, because they can understand it too!

A man is traveling the winding road from Jerusalem to Jericho. He is attacked by thugs. They rough him up, rob him, and then leave him half dead in the middle of the road. Eventually, a priest comes down the road and sees the fellow lying there in his own blood. If he's dead (and it's hard to tell) to touch him would render him unclean. He would have to go through all kinds of ceremonial hoops, and would lose a lot of time in the process. Besides, it could be a trick. The same people who did this might be poised to do it again to the priest. So the priest plays it safe and hurries by on the other side of the

road.

A little later, a Levite happens along. Levites were also religious workers. He's a busy fellow. He has places to go, things to do, people are expecting him. He certainly doesn't have time for this and he knows there are others who will eventually come along. They probably have more time. So the Levite also hurries by on the other side of the road. Besides, this guy in the road, maybe he's done something to earn it. Maybe he's addict and tried to cheat someone. Maybe God is teaching him a lesson; to help him would interfere with divine justice.

Jesus continues the story. Along comes a Samaritan. Understand Jews hated Samaritans. This hatred started centuries before and over time, detached from the original conflict and grew a life of its own. Jews thought of Samaritans as half-breeds, given to villainy and violence, zealous adherents to bad theology. Those listening were probably expecting the Samaritan to finish off the injured fellow.

Yet Jesus has something else in mind; he makes the Samaritan the hero of the story. It's a Samaritan who finally has compassion on the man. It's a Samaritan who refuses to pass by on the other side of the road. Instead, he kneels down and binds up the wounds as best he can, pouring on oil and wine. Then he heaves the man onto his own animal and takes him to an inn where he looks after him, eventually leaving behind money for the innkeeper to do the same.

It's not the main point of the parable, but Jesus works in this little twist to teach us something about racism, that it's not fair or just to clump people together like that. It makes things simple for the racist, but people are much more complicated than racism allows.

In any event, back to the main point. Which of these three proved to be a neighbor? Reluctantly, the lawyer admits it's the one who showed mercy. "You go and do likewise."

Of course, people have messy backgrounds, messy habits and messy problems, which means it's nearly impossible to help them without getting messy yourself. Long time friends who are going through a nasty divorce; a neighbor whose kids are nearly uncontrollable; an old person living in a rundown house packed to

the gills and smelling of cat urine; a parent who, given a list of five options, four of them good, one of them bad, will somehow identify the bad option as the only way to go; a friend who has a lot of needs, and very high standards and doesn't know how to say "thank you."

Often, trying to help someone makes you feel stupid. People are complex and have many layers; their problems are also complex and have many layers. It's always a temptation to think, "Surely there's someone better qualified to help this person." And you know, there is! But God has not put that one in the position to help. He has put you on that road to Jericho, at just the right time, at just the right place, so that your life that intersects with the guy lying in the road. Are you going to pass by? With regular frequency now, there are stories in the news of an event, maybe a car fire with the occupants still inside, and instead of helping, people pull out their phones and start filming. Bad Samaritans!

Usually, however, no one will notice if you pass by, no one but God. Moreover, we've got life scheduled down to the minute. Helping another never comes at a convenient time. It never fits neatly into our schedules, especially when we allow our routines to become very rigid. Helping others and rigid routines – those two don't mix; not at all. Finally, we are all curved inward. It's our condition. I'm sluggish in even speaking to my neighbors. Often I'm so absorbed with my own problems that I fail to inquire about the well-being of my neighbors. If someone should ask me for a little money, I feel like I'm being asked to give away the household gods and idols, and I mask my greed as a show of responsibility and caution.

Yet Jesus means what he says in verse 37: go and do like the Samaritan. However messy, however inconvenient, even if it makes you feel stupid: give your time, your money, and your help to your neighbors in need.

We've almost forgotten the initial question of the lawyer: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" The answer confirmed by Jesus? "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." "That's right" Jesus says. "Do this and you will live."

How are you doing with all that? Do you love God with *all* your heart? Do you love and care for your neighbor as much as you do yourself? Not just those who live next door, but those who are unlike you; those who habitually make bad decisions; those who need serious and sustained help. Those who unwisely spend whatever extra money they have so they never have reserves for emergencies, and emergencies seem attracted to them like flies to honey. Do you love that one as yourself? If not, Jesus says pretty clearly you will not inherit eternal life. Do this and you will live, but if you don't . . .

That's the law beating us up as it's supposed to do. That's the law that leaves us in the middle of the road, with no strength left of our own.

Usually when we read this parable, we identify with the Samaritan. We want to be the Samaritan, not the priest or the Levite and certainly not the guy in the road. But, because of sin and the Law, we are that guy in the road, as good as dead. And if there's anyone who is like the Samaritan, it is Jesus.

Verse 33 says very simply the Samaritan "had compassion." Remember the word "splanknizomai", that sense of compassion that is so strong that it wrenches the guts. Every single time this word appears in the New Testament, it is God who is having such gut wrenching compassion. He simply must do something to help. So that's the clue that the one bending over to help the man is God, more specifically, God's Son Jesus Christ. Jesus came into this messy world and had compassion on messed up people – prostitutes, publicans, lepers. He connected with *sinners*. He was the "friend of sinners." He served them – healed them, forgave and released them from the mess of sin and the peril of death. Moreover he serves *us* sinners! He heals, forgives, and releases us from our sin and its deadly consequences. "For even the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mk. 10:45).

This was his mission. Jesus saw our need, had compassion on us, and took on the mess of our sin. He refused to walk by. He was beaten and bloodied so that we might live. He paid a price – a steep price—to restore and care for us. God did for you on the cross what needed to be done, however messy and

inconvenient.

Now it's time we follow his footsteps which lead to those lying helpless and hurting in the road. It's what we do, not to save ourselves, but because it is what God has done for us. We love because he first loved us. We serve, because he served us. We are neighbors to others in need, because he made himself a neighbor to us. Thanks be God. Amen.