

Luke 10:25-37 “Why Sabbatical?”

I know I've said this before, but I'll keep on saying it: I am so grateful that this church has a Sabbatical policy worked right into the pastor's job description. I didn't have to ask for it. I didn't have to negotiate for it. It was there already. It tells me you all “get it.” Most churches don't. Sabbatical time is most often associated with folks in the teaching and academic field. Other businesses are catching on though. I found out a few weeks ago that Sierra Nevada brewery offers Sabbatical leave for long-time employees too, so it's not just for teachers and preachers anymore! Again, thank you.

I try my best to advocate for clergy Sabbatical time when I do consultations or Search and Call orientations. Most of the time I get blank stares from church Boards or Search Committees when I ask them to consider granting Sabbatical leave to their pastors after seven years. “Why should we do that ... the pastor already gets vacation time ... why should they get more?” Well, Sabbatical time *isn't* vacation time. Yes, it's a time for rest, but it's also time for renewal. It's a time to catch up on reading, experiment with practicing new spiritual disciplines, a time to visit other congregations, and draw up a game plan for future ministry projects. There are lots of things that are not only beneficial to the minister, but to the congregation as well. But most congregations don't get it, and still just see it as glorified vacation time. Truth be told, most of the churches that have this attitude about Sabbatical leave never really have to worry about it anyway because they rarely keep a minister for more than a couple of years. So again, thanks from the bottom of my heart.

So what does this all have to do with today's scripture then? Well, today's scripture is a very familiar passage even to those who may not be familiar with the Christian tradition. It's the parable of the Good Samaritan and it goes like this ... a guy is walking along a notoriously dangerous road by himself when he gets mugged. While he's lying in the road, a priest walks by and doesn't help him. A little while later, a

Levite (think a person who assists priests in a temple) he comes by and crosses the road so he doesn't have to deal with the guy. Finally a Samaritan ... someone who was considered unclean and thus unworthy in the eyes of those who represented "Herod's church" ... he comes by and not only helps with the guy's immediate needs, but also makes sure he gets some longer-term care too. This parable answers the question posed by the expert on the law at the beginning of the passage after he quizzes Jesus on his understanding of the law. Okay, if I'm supposed to love my neighbor as myself, who is my neighbor? According to the parable, whoever shows mercy ... even one of "those" Samaritans.

And let me tell you, this is one of the most preached-on texts out there. We even dealt with it at camp this past week. Some famous people have taken this passage on and made it contextually relevant. Clarence Jordan in his Cotton Patch Bible used it to illustrate racial tensions in the South during the civil rights movement. A few years ago I think we did something where the Samaritan was a migrant worker or something of that sort. Last week, the kids acted out the story with "The Good Ex-Prisoner" and "The Good Immigrant." But the beauty of scripture is that when we read it with fresh eyes, even some of these old, familiar stories can become fresh again, especially when we look at it from the perspective of other characters in the story. We can look at it from the victim's perspective. We can look at it from the Samaritan's perspective. We can look at it from the perspective of the Lawyer who posed the question in the first place. What I want to do this morning is look at it from the Priest and the Levite's point of view.

So what would cause a priest or a Levite to pass this person by ... this person who is obviously in need? Well, it *could* be that this guy was dead and so helping the guy out might render the priest and the Levite ritually unclean. Or consider this: Maybe the priest and Levite were just acting out of fear. It's a notoriously dangerous road to travel with all the robbers and such. You don't have to watch too many post-apocalyptic, Mad-Max, Book of Eli, Planet of the Apes type movies to know that when someone is lying on the road injured out in the middle

of nowhere, there's a fair to good chance that there might be robbers waiting to pounce on the person foolish enough to stop and make a rescue attempt.

I sort of like this one because the first one ... the "I don't want to become ritually unclean" one ... that sounds sort of sketchy to us. Really? But acting out of fear ... who can fault a person for being cautious? Who can blame a person for not wanting to be a victim? We can relate to this, especially after the very public displays of violence we've seen in the last couple of months. It might explain why one would cross the road to avoid the potential trap. Especially when they were both traveling alone. Jesus really doesn't specify the reason why each person passed the victim by. It was just clear at the end of the story that the Samaritan was the good guy and that because he acted mercifully, he gets the gold star for modeling compassion in action. So here's something that I want to throw out on the table today. What if the priest and the Levite weren't avoiding this guy for safety's sake? What if they weren't even avoiding him because they were late for an important date at the temple and needed to stay ritually clean so that they could fulfill their priestly duties? What if ...

What if they didn't bother because they just weren't feeling particularly ... *empty*? What if they just had it up to here with ... everything? What if they were dealing with a chronic case of "compassion fatigue?" But these were religious people! These folks were the representatives of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel on Earth! Their job was to create ways and space for people to stay close with God. How could they *not* have cared for this guy? They worked for God, and God is all-merciful and all-compassionate! Shouldn't a priest and a Levite be at least a *little* merciful and compassionate too? I don't know. Is it easy to wear the "mercy and compassion" banner all the time? Is it *easy* to treat others with respect and dignity day and night?

At our last Board Meeting, we had Deanna and Cynthia come by to debrief us about how CHAT's Safe Space program went this year and

what's on the horizon for next year. They gave us all sorts of good news about guests who had achieved sobriety and found long-term housing, and how grateful some of our guests were and how their experience served as a wakeup call for making better choices. Deanna and Cynthia expressed many thanks to the participating churches for providing space, food, and volunteers. They were particularly complimentary of our facilities and the folks in the church and in our neighborhood who were able to help out throughout the two weeks we held Safe Space here. But they did admit that those 16 weeks were difficult for their volunteers. Especially the ones that worked just about every night doing intake, cleaning up, arranging transportation and doing some of the hard, labor-intensive, and emotionally taxing work. Deanna said, "A lot of them were right on the edge of burning out, and some of them did."

So maybe that's where this priest and Levite were coming from. They just didn't have it in them anymore. They just couldn't muster up enough strength to help another person out, so they just walked on by and said, "You know what? Not my monkey, not my circus."

I hope that as we carry out our ministry and mission in the church, we are aware of those folks in our midst who may be experiencing compassion fatigue. That's not hard to imagine is it? Especially after we've seen four major, nationally televised senseless acts of violence, and dozens of others that don't even make it on the news because they happen in places where violence and shootings are an everyday part of life. Last week after the tragedies in Chicago, Baton Rouge, and Dallas, the camp staff debated about even telling the kids. On one hand, part of the reason we even have camp is to get away from the craziness of life in the valley so we can experience God in solitude on the mountain. But we also recognize that camp is one of the few safe spaces to process the craziness of the world in the context of a community of faith. You know how I always say, "Church would be a lot better if it was more like camp?" I still believe that, and I hope this is a safe space for us to debrief and reflect on the calamities of the world and re-charge our spiritual batteries. I don't want us to experience the kind of compassion

fatigue that would tempt us to cross the road as the priest and the Levite did just because they've had it.

Katy brought up a good point last week at camp. She said that the beauty of being a part of a community ... especially a community of faith ... is that when we just don't have it in us anymore, there are others there to hold space with those who've had it and need time to heal. And there are still others who can carry on the church's mission of outreach and compassion.

Again, I'm grateful for the opportunity for this Sabbatical. I'm glad that you recognize that even clergy folks who are supposed to provide comfort and safe space run the risk of crashing when they've had it too. I'm sure that this time of rest and renewal will recharge my batteries, and I'll be able to return in September renewed and re-energized to continue doing the work that Jesus calls us to do. And I hope that we extend that to others in our church too who work so hard at making sure we have coffee hour and who plan our Vacation Bible School, and who do the things around the church that make it such a nice place to gather and worship. You are in very capable hands. Katy is not just a good scholar, she's a good chaplain and pastoral presence too as she proved on multiple occasions last week at camp. Finally, as much as I hope that no one just sits back and lets everyone else do it all until I come back in September, I also hope that no one is running around so frantically that they don't have time to take "Sabbath" too. Yes, be good to others, but be good to yourselves too. Thank you all. You are a multi-talented body of believers, and I'm awfully proud and honored that you keep me on as shepherd of this great flock. I'll see you in September!