

**Grace Episcopal Church Galena, Illinois
July 10, 2016**

**Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Gloria Hopewell
Text--Luke 10:25-37**

This was going to be an easy week – a short one following on the 4th of July holiday. Looking forward to the visit of an old friend on Saturday, and a very familiar text for today's sermon. A piece of cake, this parable known as The Good Samaritan, well known by every child who has ever gone to Sunday school. And for those who don't know the story, they do the term "good Samaritan" as it has made its way into ordinary speech – even the name of a law – representing someone who steps into a difficult situation to help. It could be the woman who came to my rescue on the toll road last fall when my car stalled to help me get out of harm's way. Or one who steps in to confront a bully who is bothering a helpless child. Or someone who jumps into a swirling river to rescue a drowning stranger. It might be a small act of kindness. It might be a heroic deed. But in each case, someone who goes out their way to help instead of just walking on by.

Like this man on the treacherous Jericho road who came upon the stranger in the ditch, all possessions – even his clothing – gone thanks to bandits. And unlike others who simply went about their business, ignoring the dying man, this one stopped, then went down into that ditch to bind another's wounds.

That alone would be enough of a story, a lesson in compassion and selflessness, putting aside one's own agenda for the sake of another. A lesson in being a neighbor – and just how wide the bounds of neighborliness might be.

Yes, that would be lesson enough. But then came Wednesday. And Thursday. And Friday. More death. More outcry. More violence. Two more African-American men killed in incidents with police officers. Peaceful protests calling for reform – the protest in Dallas under the protection of police who have undertaken such reform. Then, the tragic act of a single gunman that killed five of those officers and wounded many more. And around our country people in their grief and anger began to take sides, to line up behind the "Black Lives Matter" banners or the "Thin Blue Line." In my own extended family of many first responders, I have already alienated at least one sister for trying to explain why I cannot stand behind "All Lives Matter." We have come to an impasse.

And so, this parable has called out for more attention. No longer an easy ride. No longer a nice moral tale with a neat and tidy lesson for us. You see, I don't believe that in this parable Jesus was saying "all lives matter." Oh, of course, that's the bottom line of Jesus' teachings – we are one in Christ, after all.

But his lessons were much more particular than that. Here, he is addressing the follow-up question of the lawyer who wanted to know how he could be assured of eternal life. The lawyer knew that answer—he knew the Great Commandment that didn't originate with Jesus. It was part of their shared Jewish heritage, the Sh'ema: "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." Jesus affirmed the answer and instructed him to go and do that. That wasn't enough for the lawyer, though. He seemed to want to set some limits, to "size" this command so that he can deal with it: "who, exactly, is my neighbor?" he asks. Just how far does this thing go? Jesus response came as the parable. Not as nice little moral tale but a shocking story about Jews and Samaritans who had despised each other for various ethnic and cultural reasons--to say nothing of their differences in how they worshiped God.

Jesus did not tell a story where just anyone passing by could have encountered and aided the beaten man. He put three particular people there on this treacherous road between Jerusalem and Jericho--this narrow, steep road lined with caves that provided perfect hiding places for bandits and thieves. There were a priest and a levite, both Jewish temple leaders, who we would expect to have stopped to help one of their own who was in distress. But they did not. They passed by on the other side of the road. We don't know why—pressing obligations elsewhere, perhaps. Or just a literary device to increase the impact of what happened. For it was the despised outsider, the Samaritan who was the hero of the tale--in direct contrast to the two others who "belonged" in Jewish territory.

A particular person. One undesirable as a neighbor, perhaps. Jesus included him by pointing him out, making it clear that those we dislike or distrust or even hate are all a part of God's people. That had to be said. Because we human beings have such a tendency to split and divide. And that is why I argue against "All lives matter." That is the ideal to which we work. But first, we have to be specific about those who have not been included. We have to name the particularities before that ideal can come into being. By lumping everything together, we lose the particularities of peoples' pain and struggles, and I fear their stories become diminished—or overpowered by those who are dominant.

That lawyer needed to know that he could not draw boundaries around his comfortable life. The boundaries had to be crossed and removed. The same is true in this world today. We must remove the boundaries. We must hear the cries for justice and begin to believe the stories. We must begin to acknowledge the privileges that accrue to those of us who are white—they don't accrue because of anything we do but just are there because of our skin color. Yes. It is true. Even if we don't feel particularly privileged. Even though we have struggles of our own. Even though you and I did not participate in slavery or Jim Crow—the legacy is still operative today and still killing people.

Being people who have privilege does not say that we are bad people. It doesn't. It is not an insult or something to resent. It just is the way things are. It just helps open our eyes—and hopefully our minds and hearts to the continuing reality of racism that breeds despair and anger in those who are its victims. Yes, we can lament and mourn the deaths of these police

officers just as we do the Philando and Alton and all the others before them. But we must get to working on the cause. And that is our problem. Those of us who have—even unintentionally—enjoyed the fruits of privilege. We are the ones who must insist on justice and fair and equal treatment whether it be matters of economics , education, or criminal justice. We cannot walk down the other side of the road. Like the Samaritan, we must go into the ditch. We must bind wounds. We must accompany those who have been injured. We must help them heal. This is more than justice, isn't it? It is mercy.

Which of the three on the Jericho road was a neighbor? Jesus asked the lawyer. The answer: "the one who showed mercy." And Jesus said, "Go. Go and do likewise."

Amen.