

Pentecost 7C

July 11, 2010

Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ

Deuteronomy 30:9—14 Psalm 25:1—10 Colossians 1:1—14 **Luke 10:25—37**

In John Steinbeck's classic novel, *East of Eden*, Liza Hamilton serves as the matriarch of faith for her family. She is a pugnacious advocate of biblical morality and reads the scriptures daily as the guide for her life. Yet there are cracks in her pious veneer. Steinbeck describes her use of the Bible sublimely:

Her total intellectual association was the Bible ... In that one book she had her history and her poetry, her knowledge of peoples and things, her ethics, her morals, and her salvation. She never studied the Bible or inspected it; she just read it ... And finally she came to a point where she knew it so well that she went right on reading it without listening.

The final line is haunting. When we hear today's scripture lesson, it is too easy to read it quickly and then move on because of its wide familiarity within our culture. “Oh, the Good Samaritan – I know what that one's all about.” Yet biblical texts that are familiar to us are often the very ones whose messages have often been muted rather than unleashed. Let us come to the story of the Good Samaritan with fresh eyes and ears that truly see and truly hear.

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There is much more to this story than a cutting critique of religious leaders whose actions don't match their preaching. There's more to it than merely a model of neighborliness. In this text, Jesus explodes expectations for God's people and tears down notions of status in ways that invite his hearers to become part of God's mission in the world today.

Our text opens with a confrontation between Jesus and a lawyer (an expert on the Law of Moses). It is clear by the word “test” that this is no friendly exchange. The same root word was used of the devil's “tempting” of Jesus earlier in this gospel. But the lawyer couches his challenge in the language of eternal life. He is interested in personal salvation. He may have been expecting Jesus to make some claim about himself as the source of salvation, but Jesus does not move in this direction. Instead, Jesus responds with a question for the lawyer. He asks, “What do the scriptures say?” The lawyer answers by quoting from Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. He responds in essence: Love God, and love your neighbor. These core texts hold together the dual affirmation that one's relationship with God is manifest in one's relationship with others and that our life with others is rooted fundamentally in our relationship with God. The lawyer's answer is exactly right.

Jesus fully affirms his answer. But notice the action implicit in Jesus' reply, “Do this, and you will live.” Life with God involves more than *knowing* correct

answers. It is about actual practice. It is interesting that Jesus does not include the word “eternal” in his answer; it is a simple “you will live.” In other words, central to the Gospel is its insistence that kingdom living is a present reality and not merely a hoped-for prize at the end of life. It profoundly effects how we live life in the here-and-now. Life now is to be a foretaste of the coming heavenly kingdom, where, in the words of the Apostle Paul, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”¹

This gets to the heart of the question: Who is my neighbor? Your neighbor is anyone and everyone, for we are all created as equally loved children of God.

And yet, we have not always been so good at living out this kingdom ideal. We are often more like the lawyer than we would care to admit. We often, either consciously or more likely, subconsciously and without thought, draw dividing lines between “us” and “them.”

This week several of us watched the movie “Remember the Titans,” which is loosely based on the 1971 state championship season of the Titans football team at T.C. Williams High School in Alexandria, Virginia. The movie begins with a school district which is being forcibly racially integrated. The formerly all-white football

¹ Galatians 3:28

team suddenly has a black coach assigned as part of the integration plan. Coach Boone arrives on the scene to find himself smack in the middle of the racial divide, and a lightning rod for racial hostilities in the community arising from this forced racial integration.

Coach Boone begins by taking the players to football camp at Gettysburg College. Rather than allow the players to segregate themselves across two buses, he requires the offensive squad to sit on one bus, and the defensive squad to sit on the other. He assigns roommates at the camp: one black player and one white player per room. As the racial tensions continue during camp, he requires the roommates to get to know each other, or else they will be forced to have four-a-day workouts.

A funny thing happens as the players start to get to know each other: A team begins to form. Even more remarkably, friendships begin. Prejudices were put aside for a common goal. As one reporter said of the 1971 championship Titans, “It all came about and was possible through the hard work and sacrifices of these young men and their coaches who worked together proving to everybody that different ethnic groups can mesh unanimously for a singular ambition.”²

² Ben Morris, *Alexandria Gazette*, 1978

While Coach Boone's strategy to get his players to pull together into a team was a radical approach at the time, this approach has come to be recognized as a valid and very effective means of helping people to overcome their prejudices. Called the "Contact Hypothesis," this approach is now utilized throughout the world to help overcome racial divides. For instance, you might remember a couple of months ago when, following the annual Synod Assembly, I talked about this Synod's work in Bosnia to help the youth of the previously-warring factions to overcome their hatred and prejudice. It is this Contact Hypothesis which is being put into action to help move the people of Bosnia forward, in peace.

There are three major points in the Contact Hypothesis:

- (1) That increased contact between persons from different groups can lead to a growing recognition of similarities between them;
- (2) That while stereotypes are resistant to change, they can be altered when sufficient information inconsistent with them is encountered, or when individuals meet a sufficient number of "exceptions" to their stereotypes; and,

- (3) That increased contact may help counter the illusion that the other group consists of people which are all alike, as opposed to the members of one's own group, which are perceived as being unique individuals.³

So, I would imagine that it's about this point in the sermon when you're asking yourself, "Why is Pastor droning on about psychological theory? Where's the Gospel in this?" If so, I'd say that's a very good question to ask! If you're not asking that question, you're either not paying attention or you already know where I'm heading.

This gets back to what I was saying earlier, about us more often being like the lawyer in today's Gospel reading. It's about us, either consciously or subconsciously, draw dividing lines between "us" and "them." It's about not recognizing the vastness of humanity who is our neighbor.

The leadership of this congregation has for some time been asking a similar and related question: Who isn't with us on Sunday morning? What people, or group of people, is under-represented, or missing entirely?

The answer we keep coming back to, time and again, is young people. Children, teenagers, twenty-somethings and thirty-somethings are vastly under-represented in our congregation, if not missing entirely. We've all been greatly

³ From Robert A. Baron & Donn Byrne, "Chapter 6: Prejudice and Discrimination" in *Social Psychology, 9th Edition* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2000), 234.

troubled at the absence of these important neighbors, and have been wondering how we can better be the church for these missing groups.

What I would like to suggest to you this morning is a couple of things. First, these people that we long to have among us are thoroughly children of their post-modern generation. This means that, on the whole, they are deeply suspicious of institutions... and this includes the church. The only way that the church will be attractive to them is by being authentic and by actively living out the ideals that we claim to espouse. I'm going to repeat that last statement again, because it's something I want you to mentally chew on, on the way home, and decide for yourself what this would look like. If you need to read it, this sermon will be on the church web site by Tuesday. Here it is again: *The only way that the church will be attractive to twenty- and thirty-something postmoderns is by being authentic and by actively living out the ideals that we claim to espouse.*

Here's the second thing I want you to think about: How can we bring ourselves into greater contact with twenty- and thirty-somethings? How can we meet more people in this demographic, and how can we begin building relationships with them? If the Contact Hypothesis is correct – and I'm certain it is – one of the most effective ways for us as the church to overcome postmodern suspicions and distrust of the church as an institution is to get to know the people who are “turned

off' by the institutional church. *How can we bring ourselves into greater contact with twenty- and thirty-somethings in a way that is meaningful, loving, and authentic?*

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For me, this Contact Hypothesis is more than just psychological psychobabble. It can be a reflection of the Gospel itself. It is about the God, from whom we were estranged, loving us enough to become human. It's about Jesus, who taught us that God is not a god of wrath, but a God of love. It's about a God who loves us enough to want to be in relationship with us, knowing each and every one of us as individuals. It's about the God who continues to be in contact with us, through not only the Word and sacraments but also through the abiding Holy Spirit. We can do no better than when we reach out to our neighbors in a like manner: meeting them where they are at, with acceptance and with love.

Amen.

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