Some years ago a famous experiment was conducted with seminary students. Researchers gathered a group of ministry students in a classroom and told them that each of them had an assignment. Their assignment was to record a talk about the Parable of the Good Samaritan. The thing was, the recordings were going to be done in a building on the other side of the campus, and because of a tight schedule, they needed to hurry to that building. Unbeknownst to the students, on the path to the other building the researchers had planted an actor to play the part of a man in distress, slumped in an alley, coughing and suffering. The students were going to make a presentation about the Good Samaritan. But what would happen, the researchers wondered, when they actually encountered a man in need? Would they be Good Samaritans? Well, as it turns out, they were not. Almost all of them rushed past the hurting man. One student even stepped over the man's body as he hurried to teach about the Parable of the Good Samaritan!

It's a funny story, sort of. I would laugh more if I hadn't been a seminary student once myself, if I wasn't now a pastor. The experiment shows what most of us already know – that following Jesus' commandments is extremely difficult, even for those of us who come to church to hear and to know what Jesus expects of us.

A lawyer comes forward and asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. This was before Jesus' death and resurrection made that question moot. Jesus tells the man, “You go to the synagogue. You have heard what scripture says. I know you already know this but tell me anyway.” The lawyer answered, “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.” “Very good,” Jesus tells the man. “Go and do this and you'll be right with God.” But the man knows how hard it is to do exactly what he just recited. He is afraid that Jesus casts a wide net when he talks about neighbors and believers' obligation to love them. So he asks a question, “Well, just who is my neighbor?”

This is a good time for a lesson in love so Jesus tells a parable, a story to make his point. Jesus' words are not just for the lawyer who questions Jesus but for all who are listening.

“A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead.” Jesus goes on to tell about a man, a priest who came upon the beaten man and crossed the street so he wouldn't have to help him. Another man, a Levite, also passed by on the other side when he saw the man. Finally, another man stopped and helped the fallen man. The helper poured wine and oil on the man's wounds. The helper put the man on his own donkey and took him to an inn, then paid the innkeeper to take care of him until the helper returned to pay the innkeeper for however many nights the man had stayed.

The lawyer is following Jesus' story, maybe feeling a little guilty when Jesus talks about the priest and Levite passing the man by. But when Jesus talks about the man who stopped to help, that's when the story becomes ridiculous. What was a Samaritan doing around Jerusalem? Samaritans belonged over there, not around law-abiding Jews. Samaritans were not to be trusted. Hundreds of years before, they had intermarried with the Gentiles who conquered their territory; they had adopted some of the invaders' customs as well. Pure-blooded Jews, such as the lawyer and many who are listening to Jesus' story, detest the Samaritans and their unholy ways. So why in the world is Jesus injecting a Samaritan into his parable? Samaritans don't come near Judean Jews; they certainly don't touch them or go to the lengths the Samaritan stranger did to care for the injured man.

The lawyer isn't buying Jesus' story. Samaritans stay in Samaria and take care of their own and pious, “good” Jews do the same. Except in Jesus' example, the good Jews didn't help the fallen man. That doesn't mean the Levite and the priest are bad men. Both men could have been on their way to the synagogue, where people were waiting for them, so they couldn't be late. Sort of like the seminary students who needed to get across campus to complete their assignment.

Jesus always tailors his parables to his listeners, in situations to which they can relate. Priests and Levites and Samaritans are people Jesus' contemporaries know, people who symbolize certain morals and values. But we don't necessarily relate to those first-century characters. Maybe it would be helpful to come up with some modern parallels that resonate with us, some examples of racial and ethnic barriers we see every day. Suppose that a young woman, a Democrat with “Bernie” stickers on her bumper, is on her way to Christiansburg when her car veers off the road and into a tree. The first person to come upon the accident is in a hurry. She is a pastor and needs to get to the hospital to see someone before he goes into surgery. Surely someone behind her will stop or call 911 and help will be on its way soon. The second car is not far behind the first. He is a doctor and could call 911 if he weren't on his cell phone talking to the hospital. He doesn't even see the accident as he speeds by. A young woman is in the next car. She is on her way to a meeting of young Republicans in Blacksburg. She sees the “Feel the Bern” bumper sticker on the smashed car and groans. But she pulls as close to the car as she can, gets out and peers into the open window of the other driver's car. There is a lot of blood but the driver is conscious. The Republican reaches in and turns off the ignition. She gets out her cell phone and calls 911. She flags down a car and asks that driver to direct traffic around the wreck. She holds the injured woman's hand and asks if she can call some loved ones for her. After she completes those calls, she goes back to her car, opens the trunk, and grabs a blanket to wrap around the other woman. This Good Samaritan stays by the woman's side until the injured one is loaded into an ambulance, then follows the ambulance to Carilion New River Valley, where she sits in the emergency waiting room until she is able to see the injured woman and make sure she is going to be all right.

We could substitute other people into Jesus' parable. What if the accident victim were adamently against gay marriage and two men with wedding rings on their hands rescue her? Or if the car contains a man wearing a turban and other Muslim garb and the one who stops is a Christian? Suppose it is a policeman who is in the wrecked car and the only one to stop for him is a young black man with a “Black Lives Matter” t-shirt? What do we think of those examples? Unlikely? Ridiculous? Never going to happen? That makes us a lot like the lawyer in the parable, doesn't it? Unwilling to accept Jesus' wide definition of neighbor and substituting our much more narrow one, we look for ways to condemn the “other.” We see the things happening in our country and around the world. We sit in front of our television in stony silence as we watch cell phone video of yet another senseless death. We do nothing to stop our own apathy and that of the church. We people of privilege deny that any one group in our country is more persecuted than another. We co-opt the “Black Lives Matter” language of suffering and indignation by saying “All Lives Matter,” which of course is true, but totally negates the pain of a group of people long tormented because of the color of their sin.

Today let us come to the Lord with guilty, tainted hearts, for all the times we have passed the stranger in the ditch and kept going on our way. Let us come to the Lord with a sincere desire to be a neighbor to someone we are hesitant to help. Thomas Long writes, “Simply knowing in our minds what the right thing to do does not mean we can do it. If we are going to be Good Samaritans, then this will mean more than a change of mind. It will take a change of heart. And that's what this parable is about: a change of heart.” Long continues, “For all of our religious virtues and attitudes, we just cannot do it. We are helpless to be Good Samaritans on our own strength. In other words, we are the person in the ditch, the one who lies helpless and wounded beside the road, the one who needs to be rescued. And along comes a Good Samaritan, a Good Samaritan named Jesus -despised and rejected-who comes to save us, speaks tenderly to us, lifts us into his arms, and takes us to the place of healing.” You and I cannot act with compassion toward others until we fully accept the compassion that has been shown us, shown us by the one willing to lie in a ditch for us, willing to die for us, to die for our complacency, our silence, our willingness to watch injustice unfold around us.

On Friday, I watched the live broadcast of a prayer service at the offices of the ELCA in Chicago. This service was held in the aftermath of another week of bloodshed in our country. Our presiding bishop, Elizabeth Eaton said something that really stuck with me. Bishop Eaton spoke of our willingness, even eagerness, to let our neighbor suffer because of our inaction. She said that God must be so angry with us, angry enough to act with vengeance against us. Then she said the vengeance of our God for our sin is love. Love is God's response to our racism, sexism, misogeny, homophobia, hatred. Love is how God responds to our refusal to love our neighbor as we have been taught. “In the end,” Bishop Eaton said, “all the church has is love.” To some, that love sounds like one drop of good in a bucket of hate, not enough to make a difference. But we who are washed in the font of grace and forgiveness, know the power of that drop of love. May God give us the courage to seek out our hurting neighbors and to show them the face of love when it would be a whole lot easier to turn our face and just keep going.

Amen.

*Pentecost 7C*

*July 10, 2016*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

*Luke 10:25-37*