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## *Am I Your Neighbor?*

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**The Reverend Canon Beth Knowlton**

**July 11, 2010**

**The Cathedral of St. Philip 8:45 and 11:15**

**Proper 10 C Luke 10:25-37**

I remember my second pregnancy as a time of hope and quiet confidence. I was not overwhelmed with fears of the unknown. I had waited a long time for this second child and I was confident of my older and wiser self. While I was still nervous, I assumed that all the lessons I had learned with my daughter, left me in a much better position. One area I was convinced I could do differently was being out in the world. I could take the baby out earlier, particularly when he was not on the move and could be oh so very portable. I was going to take him with me everywhere. I knew that I had unnecessarily cut myself off from people the first time from fear, and this time was going to be different.

All of these hopes found their focus in my evening Education for Ministry group. I loved Tuesday evenings and considered this community to be of primary importance. I did not want to miss my time with them after the baby came, and I knew they would be open to my bringing him to the group. They were all excited. They too looked forward to quiet evenings with the new baby, angelically regarding them from the baby carrier. We eagerly went through advent together, watching my ever expanding belly. I was sure that the calm I felt was going to translate to a beautiful time of joy and quiet.

Well, it was a time of great joy, but it was anything but quiet. My son arrived on the scene a few weeks early, with an underdeveloped digestive system, and a firm commitment to screaming every evening. Did I mention that my EfM group met in the evening hours? Every time I brought him, he screamed bloody murder. I was up and down. Rocking and swaying. In and out of the room. I was horrified that rather than a placid baby Jesus, we appeared to be in the midst of some very unhappy prophet who was desperately reminding us of the impending judgment of a very angry deity.

If you've ever been in this situation as a parent, you realize that to you, every scream is louder than anyone else appears to be hearing. All of your fears about parenting become writ large as you are unable to calm the child in your arms. And you are convinced that you are being judged. That everyone wishes you would just go home. And that only you are unable to calm this child. That anyone else could calm the baby in three seconds. Which, they then demonstrate to all gathered when they offer to help and take the baby.

It is frustrating and embarrassing. In my situation, most of my fear of judgment became focused on one member of the group. She was someone who I was not particularly close to at the time. She of course appeared to me to be the perfect mother. While I was always bringing my own narcissism to the group, she seemed to be the most selfless mother around. She had given up her job and earnestly looked for God's invitation in her motherhood. I was convinced that her children had never cried and certainly would not have screamed from the baby carrier with an indignant red face as my child did each and every night.

I was so self conscious that I really had developed an elaborate assumption of judgment that I projected all over this poor woman. Each time my son would wind himself up, I would glance at her under cover and see her smug look of triumph. I even started to imagine that my baby must sense her judgment as was trying to increase my torment. (I'll remind you I was

very sleep deprived!)

So, I was shocked one afternoon to go to my mailbox and find a letter waiting from this woman. It was the most compassionate and supportive thing I had ever read. She assured me that she could relate to how overwhelmed I must be feeling. She shared her own experience of how much more difficult it was to have two children than one. She shared that often we imagine we know how it is going to be when it is our second baby, but in fact we have far more to juggle.

I was stunned, the person I least expected to offer me help had taken the time to reach out and support me in a profound way. The person I assumed to be my enemy and my judge, had become a lifeline of mercy and compassion. She had acted as my neighbor.

Today we hear the very familiar story of the Good Samaritan. We typically hear this as a story about who has done the right thing, and it is certainly that. We hear this as an important reminder to be active in our love. That what we do matters and that those that we least expect are often acting better than we ourselves are acting.

We also often hear this story as one of an aggressive attorney who is testing Jesus. He is attempting to use his prowess to find a legal loophole, narrow his scope of intervention so he has a nice compact area of responsibility. Figure out who my neighbor is, act appropriately, and bingo! We have eternal life. We realize that hearing this story that the lawyer is missing the whole point, and that whatever we do, we mustn't make this same mistake. If he isn't bad enough, regard the priest and Levite. Whatever we do, we mustn't act as they have.

But, what I have rarely focused on is how the man who had been beaten must have felt. What if that is who Jesus was asking us to identify with? Here we have a man on the road going from one place to another. It is a known path, and one that is hardly without danger. The road between Jerusalem and Jericho was known to have bandits and crime, so it was not a quiet stroll down to the next town.

Maybe it was a path the man had walked many times. Maybe he had taken all the necessary precautions. He went before it got dark. Had told people on each end when he was leaving and when to expect him. Maybe he had been attacked in the past and was at the ready for any new event. But whatever his preparations or expectations might have been for the journey, things did not turn out as he had expected. He was attacked, beaten, and left for dead.

Did he see the priest and the Levite cross to the other side to avoid him? We don't know. But we can imagine that what he did not expect was compassion from a Samaritan. This is someone who he would least expect to care for him.

And yet that is exactly what happened. He was bandaged, carried on the Samaritan's own animal and taken to a place of safety where he could heal.

I can only imagine how this intervention changed the life of the man who was beaten. How could he ever look on a Samaritan with the same eyes again? How could he ever pass by someone in need again? I have to believe that his whole vision of the world and the nature of mercy changed. He was given a huge gift from this unknown Samaritan, far beyond his physical healing.

And I think the lawyer had at least some inkling of this. When Jesus asks him who acted as a neighbor to the one who was beaten the lawyer answers, "The one who treated him with mercy." Our own capacity to recognize mercy usually means we are open to receiving it from unknown sources.

Before the Samaritan moves towards the beaten man, he sees him and feels compassion. In my own life, my ability to feel that compassion is often because someone extended me that same gift when I needed it most. And when I am aware of my own need for mercy, I am far more likely to extend it to others.

This is important because there is a clear call in this passage to act differently. We are called by Jesus to broaden our definition of neighbor and go places where we are uncomfortable. So how do we do this? Is it by hearing this parable as a condemnation of our own weakness? Is it by a harsh reminder that those I think are Samaritans are actually better at love than I am?

Perhaps. But honestly, I find that shame tends to shut down my compassion. It makes me see others as judging me when in fact they are treating me with love. I become defensive and start to come up with a lot of really good reasons why I

haven't acted as well as others.

We have all had our days when we have acted like the priest and the Levite. I assume that is why so many of the sermons on this text focus solely on the lawyer and the shortcomings of the priest and the Levite. It happens to us all the time. We spot something ahead of us, and we walk to the other side of the street. It might be someone who has annoyed us in the past that we duck into another hallway to avoid, just this once. It might be the outreach project we don't show up for because it is in a place of town we fear might be full of bandits. Or, we are just too tired to deal with what has popped on our journey for that day. We have packed our lives so full of activity and frenetic pacing that we are drained of any reservoir of compassion.

So we cross the road. We cross it on the bridge of our wonderful excuses for why we are simply unavailable. I long for the time where we will never have these moments. The time and place where all that are in need are cared for and extended mercy.

So, I remain curious. What is most likely to get us to that place of right action? What makes me recognize more people as my neighbor?

I think it is when I realize that I have a lot in common with the beaten man on the side of the road. When I am in touch with my own deep, in fact, life saving need for mercy and compassion my view of the world shifts. I am transformed by the people I least expected, perhaps the ones I most assumed were judging me. Our acts of compassion ultimately have to first be born from seeing someone as worthy of our love. We cannot do that if we are mired in resentment or see our compassion as only a moral obligation.

It is a moral obligation. But we enact those obligations with far more freedom and frequency when they are grounded in our own reception of God's love.

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