

**Sermon on Luke 10:25-37**  
**January 21,2024**  
**Service for Christian Unity**  
**Maplewood Reformed Church**  
**Kama Jongerius**

A man was stranded on an island.

All alone for years and years.

Finally he was located, and some people came ashore to rescue him. Before they took him off the island, he wanted to show them around. He took them to his hut and said "This is the home I built with my own hands."

Then he showed them to another building and he said "This is the church I built with my own hands."

Then someone in the group said "Hey, what's that building over there?"

The man replied "Oh. That's where I *used* to go to church."

The Christian church is well-acquainted with internal divisions. We have seen, even this past year, congregations of the Methodist Church and the Reformed Church in America self-sorting . And they are only two *recent* denominations out of hundreds and hundreds in the past two thousand years.

Sometimes divisions in congregations occur over trite issues that become magnified beyond reason. I read about a church where there was division and it began over an argument at a potluck supper when a lady brought a congealed salad she made with Cool Whip instead of real whipping cream.

Other times divisions occur over issues that some members consider substantive, while others might disagree, or don't see the issue as cause for splitting. The inability to agree on "what's at stake" is a problem in our church- world, as well as in our national political world.

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The story of the Good Samaritan is an instructive text for a time such as this.

It can serve as an impetus to consider the role we have in nurturing Christian unity.

Today's text focuses on Jesus' response to a lawyer's question: "Who is my neighbor?"

Jesus' story begins with a man who was traveling on a treacherous stretch of road, and was violently beaten and robbed. We're told he's half dead. He's naked. He's in desperate need.

The first two travelers who come upon him are both religious: one is a priest, and one is a Levite... They are church leaders. In other words, *very* "churched" people.

These two church folk come across a man who is intensely vulnerable. He is in no shape to pose a physical risk to them. And we know what they do, right?

They pass by... making a wide berth around him. Literally, they physically distance themselves.

Interestingly, the man they pass is likely a fellow Jew. One of their own.

I wonder what the priest and the Levite were thinking as they saw this fellow Jew in need, and actively avoided him.

Were they too busy?

Were they afraid if they stopped to help, they would also be attacked?

Were they simply cold and uncompassionate?

It seems they just did what came naturally:

They behaved in a self-protective way.

Which is normal human behavior.

Then, as we know the Samaritan comes along. The Samaritans were considered by mainstream Jews as heretics.

*Samaritans* considered themselves "Children of Israel";

they were very closely related to the Jews in regards to history and belief.

However, they had a few different perspectives which caused the mainstream Jews great alarm. Their primary disagreement was over the site which they believed God chose for his dwelling. (The Jews said Mt. Zion; the Samaritans believed Mt. Gerizim.)

When this heretic, the Samaritan, comes along he behaves unlike the kosher religious Jews.

The Samaritan DRAWS NEAR.

When the Samaritan gets close, he sees the depths of the man's wounds. He takes out the oil and the wine that he had with him, pours them over the abrasions and then wraps cloth around them. Then he puts him on his own animal, brings him to an inn, and continues to take care of him.

He even spends the night to make sure he's going to survive.

The next day he takes out money to cover the bill to date, gives it to the innkeeper, and says, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.'

All of this tender-loving care - from a heretic.

The finger-pointing that is going on in our national church life is clearly damaging our unity. We are quick to label others as "heretics". Then we avoid them, imagining that nothing will ever change. Perhaps not even WANTING things to change because it's easier to demonize someone (or a group of people) in order to reassure ourselves that we're the "good guys".

The Samaritan possessed the gifts of courage, compassion and imagination. He felt pity for the vulnerable man. In spite of the mess he encountered, he was able to *imagine* a different future, and *then* he helped to bring it about. Only when we begin to *imagine* a different future can we *enact* a different future.

It seems to me that "heretics" have better imaginations than highly orthodox people. Do they have more freedom to think outside the box?

Throughout history it has taken heretics to move humanity forward in theology, science, and all other fields.

Primary example: Jesus... who was considered a heretic by mainstream Jews.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century Galileo was considered a heretic for challenging the prevailing belief that the Earth was the center of the universe.

Even in sports, unorthodox players are transformative.

In the 1950's Bill Russell's coach told the college basketball player that good defensive players never jump; they keep their feet on the court. Of course, Russell kept making his remarkable defensive leaps into the air, and became a legendary basketball star - who changed the nature of the game.

Heretics think outside the box.

They dare to pave a new way; often inspiring others to also find a new way.

The Samaritan knew that when we draw near to another can we see what's going on. It's then that we can begin to get to know the "other".

We begin to understand the nature of one's

wounds,

losses,

history/upbringing,

vulnerabilities

- maybe even their genetics or mental health history.

And *every* person does have a particular background which molds them into someone different from us.

In our neighborhood live a married couple who have the gifts of hospitality, compassion, courage, and imagination. Every summer they do something quite "out of the box". They send out a reading to a wide variety of people and invite them - once a month - to their yard for fellowship and discussion.

What happens in this group is all-too rare in today's interactions between people: Conservatives, Libertarians, Progressives, mystics and agnostics sit down together to eat, share life, laugh, and discuss a reading. Even though there are disagreements, there has been no malicious fallout.

In that group we come to understand the thoughts, nuances, and hearts of people who are different than us, and we cannot dismiss them (or people like them) as unworthy/unchristian. We no longer fear their thinking or see them as a great threat.

I believe the goodwill that unfolds in that group ripples out into our community.

Tonight's event was once non-existent. But someone imagined it, implemented it, and here we are: having drawn near to one another.

This is one of the lynchpins of Christian unity – or any kind of unity:

People must draw near to each other.

And each side must be open to receiving what the other offers.

In today's environment, when we are so greatly polarized and avoidant of people with different viewpoints, drawing near to the "other" with compassion and grace is a radical act.

Can you let your imagination take you to places that would foster unity?

If you don't have such an imagination, might you consider seeking out people who *do* have a vision for a different future?

Can you imagine enacting kindness toward those you might consider a heretic?

... or to those who perceive *you* as a heretic?

Keep two things in mind:

Jesus says those who draw near in kindness will truly live;

And, in this parable, the hero is the heretic.