Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

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Sunday, October 23, 2011 *Choral Evensong*
The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost *at 4pm*

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Victor Lee Austin, Ph.D.
on
Luke 10:25-37
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THE GOOD SAMARITAN, THE NEIGHBOR

It is hard to overstate the influence of the parable of the Good Samaritan upon western society. I think of the charitable organization called the Samaritans which is dedicated to providing help to people in emotional distress or contemplating suicide, an organization dedicated not to walking past such persons but rather assuring them that they are not abandoned and need not be alone. That sense that human beings are not to be ditched when they fall into distress but rather that we should do what we can to pull up beside them—that sense has a deep place in our cultural memory that comes ultimately from Jesus, particularly his story of the Good Samaritan. The memory is still there, even if it is fading.

Let's review some details.

A man fell in among robbers: The precipitating event here is an act of violence. The world of the story is a cruel world where some people behave inhumanly, stealing and wounding and having no care for the victims they leave behind. This is our world. Some people in it are left half dead.

Three people come along, one after another. The first two, the priest and the Levite, notice but do not stop. They were respectable people, and one might have expected them to stop—although, perhaps, they had other obligations that would have been compromised had they done so. We all know the ambiguities of competing obligations and the difficulty of sorting them out. And we don't know their particular situation at that time. All we do know is: they did not stop.

The third person, who did stop, was an unappealing figure. The very appellation given to him—Samaritan—bespoke his despised status. He would have been thought of, not as a real Jew, but as a half-breed of sorts. You may recall that Jesus once, sitting by a well, spoke to a woman of Samaria. And she was struck by that act of conversation. "How is it that you, a Jew, are speaking to me, a Samaritan?" For Jews did not deal with Samaritans.

So that is a twist in Jesus' story. He gives the good actions to the person you would least expect to have them. The socially-despised guy turns out to be the good guy.

The Samaritan also is generous to a fault. He binds the wounds, and treats them as best he could, and puts the man on his own beast, and takes him to an inn, and pays for his

care—and promises to return and pay anything more, if that should turn out to be needed. Jesus strongly underlines this over-generosity.

Now if that were all of the story, it would be powerful enough, and it would certainly urge upon us the need to be generous to others. But what makes this story even more powerful is the way Jesus uses it.

We need to back up. This story comes about because of a man, a lawyer, a student of the law, who wants to test Jesus. He asks Jesus about eternal life, how to get it. Jesus doesn't answer, but turns his question back upon him. "What does the Law say?" And the man answers very well, very wisely. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbor as thyself." Jesus says: very good, do that and you'll have eternal life. But the man wants more—wants to justify himself in Jesus' eyes—and so he asks one more question. "But who is my neighbor?"

And that's why Jesus told this parable.

Now if this is all we get, we are likely to mistake the point by thinking that the man on the road—the wounded, robbed, abandoned man—is my neighbor. "Who is my neighbor?" the lawyer asks, and the answer is: any other human being who is in need.

And this sense of the neighbor being "out there" lays upon us a heavy burden, a heavy moral burden, a frankly impossible-to-bear moral burden, which, when we inevitably fail to treat all other people as our neighbors, leaves us with guilt. I doubt that there is a soul here this afternoon, who, as we made our way to Evensong at Saint Thomas, did not walk past someone in need. We walked past on the other side and did nothing. There was our neighbor, we think. We imagine Jesus pointing to him and saying: there is your neighbor.

And the burden of that way of thinking is truly intolerable. Fortunately for us, there is still more to the parable.

First, when Jesus finishes telling it, he asks a final question of the lawyer. And that question is not to repeat the lawyer's question, "Who is my neighbor?" It is, instead, a salvifically different question—in fact, a graciously different question. It is this: "Who proved himself neighbor to the man beside the road?" That's an infinite difference! Jesus does not make us ask, "Who is my neighbor?"—a question whose answer is as vast as the seven billion human beings alive today. Rather, Jesus' gracious question is: Who proved himself neighbor? Who in this story made himself a neighbor to that particular man?

In other words, the Good Samaritan didn't see a neighbor; the Good Samaritan was a neighbor.

"Go and do likewise," Jesus says. And at once we are liberated. Jesus doesn't command us to love everyone. He just wants us to start. "Can you be a neighbor to somebody?" he says. You may walk past a thousand people: can you make yourself a neighbor to at least one? Can you love at least one person the way you love yourself?

Now there is one final thing for us to learn. This story is told by Jesus to address the matter of loving our neighbor. But the commandment of love of neighbor follows upon the commandment of love of God.

Consider the scene of Jesus telling this story. Why is he there, why is Jesus getting his feet dusty and his throat dry to tell this story? Is it not because he decided to come down from heaven and walk the same road that we walk? And is it not the case that the road we walk is a road of violence and cruelty? And there he found us, beaten down by life, by sin, by crime, by apathy, alienated and near abandoned by the human world: there he met us, and bound up our wounds and dressed them with wine and oil and arranged for our healing and restored us to human company, and agreed, no matter how great the cost might be, that he would pay it. I like to think that after we were set up in the lodging house, that he, the Samaritan-figure, half-breed, mixed-blood, promising to come back and make good whatever our debts might be, that he walked on along a painful journey, a long path finally up a lonely hill, where he embraced a tree—and the iron of nails held him till he breathed no more. *When I come again*, he said, I will make it all good. And he has, and he did, and he does.

This is the deep meaning of the story of the Good Samaritan. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, for the Lord your God has proved himself your neighbor.