



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, October 27, 2019
The Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost

Choral Evensong
at 4:00 p.m.

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Adam Spencer, *Associate for Pastoral Care*
on
Luke 10:25-37
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Fiddler Crab Grace

I'd never seen a fiddler crab before.

I'm from Ohio and we don't have very many crabs there except the ones flown in for restaurants to serve with drawn butter. So walking along the boardwalk on the shore of the Outer Cape this summer, I was amazed to see the wet sand all around me swarming with thousands of fiddler crabs. These strange little creatures with one tiny and one huge pincer arm moving not forwards but sideways. Scuttling sideways across the sand.

God sometimes moves like a fiddler crab; I've come to learn. Sideways. His Gospel and his grace enters our life by way of surprise, juxtaposition, shock even. Not the way we would expect, and often enough, not the way we'd like.

Jesus teaches us about love and holiness in today's Gospel reading through a sideways sort of story that would have been uncomfortable and shocking to his hearers in his own day even if it has been dulled for us in ours by familiarity.

We encounter Jesus in this passage from Luke's Gospel teaching and giving the crowd the two great commandments - to love God and to love neighbor. He does this in response to a question from a lawyer, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?"

Love God with all you have. Jesus says. And love your neighbor as yourself.

And then, in good lawyerly fashion, this guy asks a follow up, clarifying question. "And just who exactly is my neighbor?" What are the exact parameters of this loving that I have to do?

So Jesus tells this story that many of us know all too well. So well that it's become harmless and toothless. A traveller is ambushed on the dangerous, bloody, bandit-prone Jericho road. He's robbed and beaten nearly to death. A priest walks by, then a levite, a temple official. The priest and the levite both avoid the half dead man, walking past on the other side of the road. Bound by the codes of their culture, they know that to touch a dead body or a dying one would make them impure. So they pass by. And then the Samaritan comes along.

Samaria, in Jesus's day, was a region located in between northern Galilee and southern Judea. Samaritans were a distinct ethnic and religious group, distant descendants of the northern tribes of Israel. But they were bitter enemies of their Jewish cousins. Samaritans were detested and considered impure by the Jews for their history of intermarrying with and sharing in the customs of foreign neighbors and for honoring foreign gods. And the Samaritans hated the Jews right back.

They were, to one another, the Other with a capital O. But they were also literal neighbors. Living right next door.

The priest and the Levite in the story often get a bad rap. Cast as the villains of the piece. But they were - in their own minds - attempting to be good, trying to be holy by avoiding the dead or dying body lying in the dust at the roadside. They were following the rules, obeying their cultural understandings of goodness and holiness inscribed in the religious purity regulations about touching the dead and the dying.

But Jesus teaches a different kind of holiness and here the Samaritan of all people embodies it. It's a holiness that's all about love; of God, of neighbor. A holiness that's about loving God by imitating his incarnational love for us sinners by our reaching out and caring for others as he came among us to help us, to save us. It's a holiness that's about a togetherness, a kinship, that extends beyond cultural and prejudicial and legal bounds.

What does that sort of holiness, that kind of radical kinship look like today?

I can't help but think about the idea of borders and boundaries.

The Samaritan crosses a few borders and boundaries in this story, to help the traveller in need. He's outside of the borders of his own people's land, for one. But then he crosses the cultural border too, the boundaries set by fear and ethnic hatred, the border between pure and impure, the boundaries of legal and illegal.

And he crosses these dangerous lines to love his neighbor. To help the man he's supposed to hate.

And so this one guy, this Samaritan, who was already considered outside the circle of the community, in further crossing a line becomes, ironically enough, the model of kinship and love and holiness for those within the community.

He goes to the injured, dying man and he helps him. Lavishly helps him. Sees to his safety and care and every need. Importantly the Samaritan is with the wounded traveler where he is, tending to his specific needs.

"Kinship," Jesuit priest Greg Boyle says is "not serving the other, but being one with the other. Jesus was not "a man for others"; he was one with them."

"Compassion," Boyle continues, "isn't just about feeling the pain of others; it's about bringing them in toward yourself. If we love what God loves, then, in compassion, margins get erased."

Because this is how God loves us. He loves us as we are. He comes to us where we are. Among us. As Saint Paul writes, "God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us." This is what the "kingdom" of God looks like. God is greater. And God wants us to be greater too.

There's a really excellent book that came out this past summer by photojournalist Chris Arnade. The book is called "Dignity" and kinship is what it's all about. In essays and striking photos, Arnade introduces the reader to drug addicts in the Bronx and in Appalachian towns and to economically struggling blue collar communities in Cay-ro, Illinois, Selma, Alabama and small town Ohio. He shows us our fellow Americans,

our neighbors, who we (or at least I) often do not see or choose not to see. And he lets them speak to us in their own words. He allows them show up in his photos as they are in all of their pain and struggle, failure and frailty, joy and aspiration. And in their eyes, in these haunting and beautiful and painful photos, he shows us their inescapable human dignity.

It is a call to kinship. It's a sort of Good Samaritan parable, or series of parables, for our current moment. A powerful answer to the question: "Who is my neighbor?"

Arnade, in one of his essays in the book, illustrates the tensions between the Muslim Somali refugee community and the native white French-Canadian community in a small rural town in Maine.

He writes about Hawo, a twenty-six-year-old Somalian, who shares with him about the negative stereotypes of Somalians and Muslims that she encounters in town. But she tells him also about her white neighbor Bob who lived alone in her building, a veteran on disability, who always said hi to her and who shoveled her car off in the winter unasked. One day Bob got sick, so Hawo organized a rent fund among the Somalian community to help Bob with his bills. "I'm not sure anyone else helped him other than us," she said. When he died, she went to his funeral. The only black person there. And she felt uncomfortable doing so. But afterwards everyone in the room, Bob's friends and family, came up to her and hugged her and thanked her for helping him when he needed help. "It is this that I will remember and think about," Hawo told Arnade.

Love God and love your neighbor. Love the person in front of you. It's the basic message of Jesus presented beautifully in this parable today. Love the person in front of you. Your neighbor. Your kin.

And if anything I've said today has made you even a little uncomfortable, as this story always makes me uncomfortable, well then we are both in good company with Jesus's neighbors who tried to kill him for saying things like this story that he tells about the Good Samaritan. The Gospels are full of these harsh and troubling reminders of the strange and scandalous love of God.

Surprising, sideways, fiddler crab messages of troubling, startling, healing, saving grace that hopefully gets under our skin and, if we're really lucky, into our hearts as well.