

Church of the Good Shepherd
and
St. John the Evangelist

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“Dropping the Plumb line”

The road to Jericho winds out of the Kedron Valley leading east towards the River Jordan and on towards the desert. But, between Jerusalem and Jericho are the mountainous hills of Judaea. They are barren, with little shelter and lots of rocks. In Jesus’ day it was notorious as “bandit” country. It is the setting for today’s Gospel story of the “Good Samaritan.”

Jesus tells the story in response to the question “who is my neighbor?” It was an easy question to answer, when the law of the schema: “love God and love your neighbor was first written.” Everyone then lived in tents, as a nomadic people in the desert. Your life depended on your neighbor and theirs on you. When your camp was attacked you fought side by side with your neighbor. You children grew up with their children. You son married their daughter.

But after 1,000 years living in the Promised Land the schemas “love your neighbor” had lost its significance. The 12 tribes had settled in different areas, even they had lost their identity. No one spoke to Samaritans because they had stayed behind and worked for the enemy during the exile. 500 years later the feud still goes on.

Jesus uses it, to illustrate that the answer to “who is my neighbor,” lies in the human heart. If it “lives, breathes and needs help, it’s your neighbor.”

Jesus’ parable lesson is so poignant, because he picks the one person least expected, their sworn enemy, the traitor in their midst, the person they most despise, the Samaritan.

Yet, it is the Samaritan, who epitomizes the schema: “love God and your neighbor as yourself.” It is the Samaritan who stops and shows compassion. It is the Samaritan, who is closest to the Kingdom of God.

For me, the parable illustrates something else, which Jesus attempts to teach his disciples on another occasion. He tells them: “it is not the one who says ‘Lord, Lord’ who will enter the Kingdom, but the one who does the will of my Father.”

It is an oft repeated lesson, Jesus constantly makes a differentiation, between those who hear his words and do nothing, and those who take his words and plant them in their hearts.

In this regard, Jesus’ teaching is exactly like those opening lines of the Law of Moses. “Take this law of love and write it on your heart.”

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Jesus would have us inscribe the words of the Gospel on our hearts also. In other words, we must carry the words of his teaching with us, so that they become lived realities in our life.

How do we gauge that we are indeed living the lives that Christ would approve of? How do we know?

In the Old Testament Amos asked himself the same question. “Am I a prophet? Am I God’s Prophet? How do I know that I am in the right?”

In response, God shows him a plumb line to tell him that there can be but one truth, one way and that is the “way of God.” Amos goes out then and faces his enemy and confronts him. When he says: “I am not a Prophet.” He uses the word Nami?? “I am not a Nami” A Nami was the official prophet or spin doctor of the Royal Court.

No, Amos wanted to tell his enemy that he was God’s prophet, a simple farmer who knew the seasons and knew where God’s truth lies.

In choosing a church many people ask the same question and seek answers. Is this church a church of integrity? How close does it keep to the teaching of Jesus? Is it shallow or is it deep? Is it about a lot of people making themselves feel good, or is it a positive active force in the community? Is it exclusive and think that it alone holds the truth of the Gospel or is it welcoming to all?

Jesus’ parable today is surely his plumb line to how near or far we come to his teaching. We have to ask ourselves the question: “Who is my neighbor?” And the answer depends on which side of the road we choose to walk on. “Do we walk on the other side? Do we walk among the poor, the sick, the victimized, the hurt and the distressed?”

Yet, the Good Samaritan does not stop with taking the injured man to the Inn and praying for him, he promises to return. It is not enough, Jesus seems to be saying to help someone once, you have to make them your neighbors. You have to invite them in. You must make them feel welcome.

Being a Good Samaritan is not easy. It is a personal decision to “do the right thing” no matter the circumstances and never to walk away.

In today’s Baptism we promise to renew our Christian vows. We drop the plumb line once again, to re-align ourselves once more with Christ, to make his message, our message, to make this Gospel, our Gospel.

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Today, we stand up with Danyel and say with pride that we belong to Christ and him we follow.

Have you ever gone off someone really quick?" Someone you liked and suddenly it's as if you are seeing or hearing a different person? It happened to me recently with Dennis Miller the comedian. I hadn't seen him for a while, and then in the last month I saw his stand up routine three times on television.

I was left asking myself the question: "Is there nothing sacred to him? Is there no one he respects? Will he tear everyone down and ridicule anyone for a cheap laugh; religion, faith, belief, values, family, churches all come under the sword of his tongue. I was left disappointed, because he is a smart, intelligent man. But in the end, I wanted to ask him: "What do you stand for? We know what you hate, but tell us now what do you love?"

Today's Gospel and this Baptism invite us to reflect on what we love. I love being a Christian. I love being called by Christ every morning of my life and I love being an Episcopalian.

We may not claim to be the one and only true authentic church of Christ, but we are something else. We are the church of the 'not so perfects.' We are a church of the "leftovers," and the "discarded." We are a church of sinners, divorcees, failures, and second time rounders. Our delegates always look as if they are more comfortable in a Flea Market than a Convention. We are a self critical church, always "dropping the plumb line:" to see how far from the Gospel and the words of Jesus we have strayed.

Well to me, that is okay. It's okay to be the "B" team. It's okay to come off the bench. It's okay to come out of the bullpen in the 8th to try and win the game.

Because it seems to me, that when Christ went to choose his team, he didn't go to the top of society. He did not choose the powerful and the mighty. He chose the little people, fisherman, who didn't catch, Tax collectors that people hated, guys who were not so smart, women who others despised, a little man who fell off his horse.

Baptism today tells us that none of that matters; it does not matter because in Baptism we put on Christ. His values become our values, his mission becomes our mission, his father becomes our father, and his Spirit becomes our Spirit.

In Christ we are born anew. As Christ's body we have a new identity. Dennis Miller can scoff and ridicule us, but that is only because he does not know us. He knows Danyel; he does not know or understand Danyel the Christian, Danyel the chosen one, Danyel the disciple. He does not know the power of Christ's love in her life.

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Oh we can renew our baptismal promises again today and we will mean them as before, but you and I know that in the future we will still have to keep “dropping that plumb line.”

Are we walking by on the other side? Are we Samaritans or priest, are we even a neighbor to those who need us?

We will keep “dropping the plumb line” because we know who Christ has chosen to be his church in this place. We are his motley crew. We are his “B” team. We are his bull pen. and we look to him to keep us true.

As we baptize Danyel today, we pray for her and we pray for our church. We pray that we may treat everyone as our neighbor, and in doing so, we will bring closer the Gospel Kingdom that Jesus taught.
This we ask in Jesus’ name,

Amen+