

AMOS 7:7-17 or DEUTERONOMY 30:9-14

PSALM 82 or PSALM 25:1-10

COLOSSIANS 1:1-14

LUKE 10:25-37

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost; Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 10, 2022; Year C

The Human Equation!

After what must have been an exhausting six days of creation, as we lean heavily into some quintessential biblical mythology the captive Israelites conveniently borrowed from the Babylonians, God looked upon all that had been conceived and creatively crafted and declared, not just that it was good, but that it was “very good!” Immediately our minds perceive that not only is God good, but we also quickly are able to comprehend, based on some biblical wisdom, that this goodness comes solely from God. Goodness is obviously a divinely appointed trait. The good news for all of us is that we human beings are factored in this goodness equation, created as we are in the divine image! Elsewhere we read in the biblical narrative, described in Psalm 119 (68) and in each of the synoptic Gospels in the parable about a rich man (Matthew 19:17; Mark 10:18; Luke 18:19), that God alone is good, at least according to the intuitive wisdom of Jesus, who certainly seemed to be in the know. Though Jesus deflected and denied, shunning that holy accolade for himself, humbly refusing to describe himself as good, something the rabbi readily admitted and openly acknowledged, I doubt there is anyone in this room who would doubt the goodness of Jesus’ character! I bring these images about the goodness of God to our attention this morning because today we read one of the two most popular parables in all the Bible, in the Gospel that holds most of Jesus’ parables, the parable of the story called *The Good Samaritan* in Luke. You see, the problem we encounter with this parable, as with other parabolic narratives found

in the Gospels, is that they have been given names that have taken on a life of their own and have become synonymous with the content these ancient legendary tales attempt to tell. The problem is that most casual biblical readers assume that the biblical writer, editor, or compiler, any or all, bothered to take the time and cared enough to name these mythic texts. They did not! A surface reading of this story about a priest, a Levite, a Samaritan—sounds like the beginning of a bar joke—and, to a lesser degree, a victim, all of them unnamed and unknown, is that the word “good” never appears anywhere in the parable. If, as according to Jesus, only God is good, God alone and no other, then we have a real problem here in our misconceived naming of the Samaritan as such, do we not? And this naming oddity associated with today’s parable is not unique to this one story but is a frequent recurrence accompanying all these beloved stories. For example, there is no “prodigal” mentioned in the parable called *The Prodigal Son*! I say all this as we begin our homiletical journey this morning because, in as much as possible, I would like for you to take the word “good” out of the equation, to pretend that this word is not or never was associated in any way with the parable in question. My hope is that this will perhaps open a whole new world of interpretive possibilities as we seek to look at this parable with fresh eyes, hoping to unlock the mysteries that have lurked beneath the surface of this verbal object lesson for thousands of years. Let’s get started!

Part of the danger with any of these familiar Bible stories, lessons we learned by heart during our Sunday or Church School adventures as children, is that the time-tested adage is, oh, so true, familiarity breeds contempt! We get to a place where we know in our hearts and minds, beyond a shadow of all doubt, exactly how these familiar stories go and exactly what they mean. When and if truth be told, this often turns out not to be the case at all. That being said, I will turn right around and make a general assumption, an observation that I often do when introducing the Sunday lections, and that is that you do indeed know

almost verbatim the storyline, having memorized the plot twist in this parable quite well. There is no way to deny or forget our familiarity! Commensurate with most parables, this parable about a priest, a Levite, and a Samaritan, follows a usual pattern, a parabolic paradigm if you will. Sidebar: incidentally, however, the victim by the side of the road is ironically, from a literary genre standpoint, rendered nothing more than linguistic collateral damage in the narrative. **This popular parable forms what is a typical and traditional triad of characters found in these ancient oral stories that are common throughout the Gospels. But there is something way wrong with this trilogy of literary participants. According to many scholars commenting on this text, one of the three players has been hijacked and replaced with a most unusual suspect. Yes, an interloper, an imposter has been invited to this literary party. You see, the way the story probably originally unfolded as it was told was that the first two figures in the trilogy of the cast of characters consisted of the traditional priest and Levite, no surprise there. Placed in the story because of their religious status, the crowd would have resonated with these two archetypes who would be portrayed as the fall guys in the parable. Those gathered around the storyteller would have loved this epic tale, immensely enjoying any potentially insulting potshots, any derogatory salvos, any negativity, lobbed toward these religious prudes. Makes perfect sense! The story turns on a dime, however, when Jesus dares to name the third person, a totally out of place character who proved to be an incredibly surprising, even shocking, addition! For suddenly Jesus makes it painfully aware to everyone present, comprising what was surely a very Jewish audience, that there would be no perfunctory Israelite to round out this threesome. Those gathered to hear the rabbi were now being forced to hear that not only would it not be the expected Israelite, but rather it would turn out to be a most unlikely candidate, a Samaritan, of all people. Yes, a despicable Samaritan would become the hero who saves the day and the man in this tale, an idea, an image, that would have been far more than off-putting,**

but unacceptable, untenable in every way imaginable. Plot twist, indeed! This would have been a most repugnant, most repulsive suggestion, the height of nonsensical speak by the rabbi! Yes, to use one of my favorite phrases, the consummate theological psychobabble! No! Not today! Not tomorrow! Not next week, month, or year! Never! Never! Never! Oh, what a conundrum Jesus has created for this now very offended crowd!

It is the insertion of this unclean, apostate, reprobate, half-breed, that would have made the story totally unbelievable, untenable, and most of all unacceptable. And this is where the rubber meets the road in the story! Normally writing for a gentile audience, this Lukan parable about an oddly converged threesome was obviously intended for a clearly Jewish audience. Let's pretend for a moment that the original plot twist was still in play, that this parable was a story about a mythic trinity of a priest, a Levite, and an Israelite, a layperson among the Jews. The story would have been common sensical, celebrated by the rank and file, lauded by the average Joe and Jane Jew who disdainfully watched on a daily basis their religious authorities go about their ritualized business, putting on pious airs while at the same time demanding of those in their care, their congregants, underlings who were to be seen and not heard, whose sworn allegiance and faithful practices to the law were stellar despite the fact that these strictures were stifling and suffocating the very life out of these common folk. Even so, they obediently and steadfastly remained a faithful Judaic constituency, never considering an alternative viewpoint, never really given much room to critique or to question those in authority who were there defacto superiors. Not only did the parable, as it was probably perceived in its original form, put the stuffy religious practitioners on the defensive and in their place, but it efficiently and expediently elevated the lowly status of the common temple attendee, making the everyday Israelite the hero in the story, the savior of the situation. Yes, keep it familiar, in house! Yes, keep it within the confines of the family! Keep the boundaries of the club,

secret handshakes, and all! There would have been whoops and applause and backslaps all around, as the bottom feeders, those on the bottom rungs, finally had their day and got their due, a credit to their faithful and resolute attentiveness. End of story! Once upon a time meets happily ever after!

“Not so fast,” as Lee Corso of ESPN football Gameday says! Upon a closer review as go about an important task, the always very necessary exegetical, hermeneutical work, the heavy lifting, that accompanies any reputable, legitimate, serious Bible Study, the text reveals that Jesus took this parabolic story to a whole new place, putting it on a different plane, taking it to a different stratum, a level almost if not totally out of reach from his up-to-this-point empathetic and sympathetic audience! **Yes, it is the kind of thing the rabbi, this unique preacher and teacher, is known for doing! He never quite seems to be able to stay in safe boxes, color inside convenient and comfortable lines. Jesus never could just leave well enough alone! Such is the lonely way of the preacher, the solitary road of the prophet! Jesus has now, no doubt, managed to offend every listener within hearing range of these hyper-heretical words. As New Testament scholar Bernard Brandon Scott says in his commentary on this controversial narrative, “the position of the audience is critical.” If the hero in the story was a rank-and-file Gentile, whatever or whoever that might be, the story would have been hard to swallow but at least digestible, affording as much plausibility as deniability. But no, Jesus does not incorporate just any ordinary, run-of-the-mill Gentile, but he has the audacity to name a Samaritan, the very word suggesting uncleanness, pollution, vile and detestable, the epitome of human scum, pure unadulterated filth! Scott adds, “The enmity between Jew and Samaritan is proverbial.” That is an interesting way to describe their foul relationship. The Mishnah declares, “He that eats the bread of the Samaritans is like one who eats the flesh of swine!” And we all know what Jews think of swine! It is anything but a Kosher delight! Loving pork as I do, the other**

white meat, frankly, better to eat swine than a Samaritan! There was simply no love lost between these longtime sworn enemies. Samaritans worshipped on the wrong mountain, Mt. Gerizim, instead of on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. So much for interfaith dialogue and acceptance! And that basically amounted to the beginning and the end of their hostilities, with a whole lot of ugly in between! **Scott acknowledges, “All cultures, modern and ancient, draw boundaries between themselves and others, whether it is a matter of defending their turf or building iron curtains. Greeks called everyone who did not speak Greek a barbarian, and Jews divided the world between themselves and the Gentiles. The temptation to draw a line, to dare someone to step across it, seems to be a universal human phenomenon.”** And, I would add, a most unfortunate one, a very negative trait. Yes, it unfortunately seems to be the nature of human nature to draw inappropriate boundaries, our perverse versions of plumb lines in the sand!

Both the priest and the Levite pass by on the other side of the road, directly and intentionally avoiding the man from a safe distance, only able to slightly make out a fuzzy silhouette, a blurred still figure from afar, choosing to turn a blind eye to someone about whom they are too embarrassed to make eye contact, much less an educated guess, any intelligent assumption. They cannot risk even the remotest interaction! The creator of the parable that Jesus tells indicates that surely the victim of this heinous crime, this unprovoked attack, was Jewish to heighten the drama and to give it street (cred)itbility. We safely assume this because it is a parable! There can be no doubt that the victimized man was a Jewish individual though he is never identified. All we are told is that he is now a half dead man, stripped and beaten! By virtue of being naked, the priest and the Levite could have observed his Jewishness or lack thereof—circumcision—had they cared enough to get close enough for a better look. The quick or the dead? He is described as hovering somewhere in the middle, as

half dead, adding to the drama and to the heightened context of the storyline. If he is still alive, it would not only be prudent, but mandatory for the priest and the Levite to render aid. If he is dead, it would not only be prudent, but mandatory for the priest and the Levite to give the man a proper burial, the rubrics regarding clean versus unclean suspended to allow them to fulfill by law, with impunity, to do the proper, the right, thing, the decent deed. Wanted! Dead or alive! The Mishnah and the Talmud, ancient commentaries on Torah, interpretive documents explaining the nuance and subtleties of the law, explicitly clarify this position. The priest and the Levite would have been required, “enjoined,” by the law, as Scott notes, to bury a *meth mitzwah*, a neglected corpse. The priest and the Levite, by virtue of position and profession, surely were aware, they knew this by heart and thus had no leg on which to stand, no justification for their blatant disregard of an individual no matter, regardless of status as dead or alive! Brilliant writing underlying the unfolding plot! As Scott succinctly notes, “. . . the corpse takes priority over religious purity!”

Ah, but alas the victim was not dead but only appeared to be, only very recently having had the living crap beaten out of him, a concussion most likely. Ergo, therefore, he is a living and breathing human being. And not only that, but he is a Jewish one, making the avoidance and ignorance displayed by the emotionally detached priest and the Levite all the more appalling. They have dissed one of their own, avoided and ignored, cognitively neglecting a member of the household of Israel. Perhaps the poor soul had been victimized by someone of non-Jewish persuasion, the ultimate insult to his emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual health. The priest and the Levite have an opportunity to right an egregious wrong, to bring justice to injustice, to bring healing and wholeness to where there was none! Out of the whirlwind, out of the vortex of this injustice, and to the rescue comes a lowly, disgusting, Samaritan. He not only binds the stranger’s wounds, but he goes beyond the required, more

than the distance, the extra mile, taking the man to an inn and making sure that all this stranger's needs, now and later are met, no matter the cost, with no concern, no mention of the expense. Mortified at this point, as Jesus tells his version of this parabolic tale, each and every listener present then and now must make an internal, and an eventual external, decision for themselves. Everyone must take a personal audit and pick a side! They must either side with the self-righteous response of the priest and the Levite of whom they already find substantive suspicion and a certain level of disdain and disgust, or they must side with the Samaritan and admit and own their own horror, revealing a bias, a prejudice, a bigotry, that lies at the core of every distrusting human need for territorialism, turf wars, and the defense of tribe and clan. What a conundrum! What a dilemma! Acknowledging the near impossibility of identifying with the Samaritan because of their enmity, Scott points out that "If the hearer identifies with the priest or Levite, then the story will abort with their passing." Case closed! Cold, but convenient! But upon further review, Scott adds, however, that there are only two real options: "to identify with the half-dead man and suffer the compassion of a Samaritan, or to reply that the story is false, that the world is not like this." In other words, this is make-believe because it simply could not, should not, and would not happen, ever! Oh, how the crowd surely wished Jesus would have stuck to telling the story in the traditional way, the way it undoubtedly originated, with its comfortable context and expected outcome, polite, prim, and proper, as boring as it might have been. Just stick with the tried and true, always trustworthy, story of a priest, a Levite, and an Israelite, the latter being the hero with a satisfying solution for everyone present, giving them a wonderful sense of entitled self-righteous self-satisfaction. As Scott concludes, "The world with its sure arrangement of insiders and outsiders is no longer an adequate model for predicting the (realm of God).

It probably will not come as much of a surprise to any of you, but this parable, as with much of the content of the Gospels, constitutes a hospitality text, though this one can easily be described as quintessential in quality. At the core of Jesus' message in this ancient story is what constitutes the very nature, the very understanding, of neighbor? Who and what is my neighbor? I add what because the DNA, the nomenclature, of an individual is as important as the person, inseparable aspects interpreting their being. Embracing neighbor means embracing their person and all the unique things that makes them tick, except when those attributes are of a negative nature and thus diminish their and all humanity. Then we can and must, we have no alternative other than to dismiss and denounce! One of the things that I have noticed in my preaching over these thirty plus years is just how repetitive, how redundant, the message of the Gospel really is. And folks, that is by design because the message of the Gospel is all about how we encounter and embrace others, yes, every person, all those who by divine fiat constitute our neighbor. In discussing the essence of neighborliness, Scott invokes another writer's observation about the "double controversy" at stake in the exchange between Jesus and the expert in the law that serves as the context, the platform, from which Jesus then astutely springboards the telling of the parable. This "double controversy" is based in the concern about inheriting eternal life followed by the ultimate question about just who my neighbor is. The two go hand in hand! They are inseparable! This leads to a further consideration that we nuance the not-so-subtle difference between understanding of neighbor as "object," in other words, someone I must love to get an eternal carrot, and a "subject," someone who shows mercy and, actually, really and truly, does give a damn about other human beings, no matter! It is a matter of must do, have to, versus a profound want to, a willingness born of grace and gratitude, overwhelming us with divinely profound, inspired and inspirited, values of joy, mercy, peace, and of course, love. In light of our hearing once again this profound and perfect parable, I am compelled, even forced,

once again to ponder the onset and proliferation in our own country of the authoritarian nationalistic theocracy now masquerading as Christianity, positioning itself for power, a blight that is consuming this nation. How can anyone read the Gospels, specifically stories like the one we read today in worship, and advocate for a selective God of judgment and retribution fueled by a faithless allegiance to a counter narrative that at its core is hateful, offensive, insulting, condemnatory, and exclusive, including all its perverse derivatives that go into segregationist mentalities? Inquiring minds want to know! The gap is getting wider by the day! It is growing leaps and bounds!

Yes, in so many ways this is the simplest of lessons and yet it constitutes the most difficult, the most complex, the most impossible! At the root of this parable, we must go back to the story that precedes it in chapter eighteen (18) the place in Luke's Gospel where we encounter a rich man who also wants to find the key to eternal life. He is told to go and sell all that he has and come and follow and he sadly slinks away because he knows he cannot do that, not today or tomorrow or the next day! Both the rich man and the Samaritan are called to do the improbable, no, the impossible, the unimaginable and untenable. Sadly, only one of them, the one without all the baggage, the one minus the pedigree, including the prospects of having to carry all the excessive weightiness of traditional religiosity, is able to comply with where the Spirit of the still speaking God would lead. The rich man must become poor! The Samaritan must become neighbor! Good luck with either of those radical propositions! Determining who my neighbor is and accepting them forthright is central to our belief in the ways of the one we have chosen to follow in Jesus of Nazareth. The ultimate goal of our faith, the proof of the pudding, is not only that we indeed love God, but that we love neighbor as ourselves, and yes, that means loving self. Frankly, this parable sums up completely in a nutshell, totally summarizes, the content of the last three weeks' worth of preaching. In an ultimate way, it answers the question for

any of us who seek, not just to follow Jesus, that colossal, ginormous, challenge never amounting to child's play in the least, but showing us explicitly how to be human! After Cain's murder of his brother Abel, the Holy One inquired as to where his brother was. Cain arrogantly and smugly responded with what became a sobering question for the ages, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Damn right! The parable we call The Good Samaritan answers that question with conviction and clarity, with a resounding and unequivocal "yes," with no room for excuses to the contrary, no ifs, ands, or buts! It is not about being good, but it is about being human! Good, no! Human, yes! Therein is our baseline for living! To use Amos' imagery, it is a plumb line, yes, the plumb line for living, the standard, the expectation, yes, the command for one and all! Yes, it is more than a mere measure of our humanity! It is the human equation! Just be human and good will take care of itself! Just be the best human being you can be, being, being very important, and even as you do, as you go about your doing! As Jesus is reported to have once said, as echoed by the ancient writer, "Go and do likewise!"

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and longs for us to be good as well! Amen and amen!