

## Faith and Art: The Beauty of Compassion

[Luke 10:25-37](#)

Faith and Art

Dr. Douglas A. Learned

Sunday, February 6, 2011

Chapel at 8, Sanctuary at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

This is the second of three Sundays in our Faith and Art series of sermons and art exhibitions. On each Sunday in the series during our program year, we are focusing on a passage from the gospel of Luke.

The first sermon focused on the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son, and our title was *Faith and Art: The Beauty of Grace*. This Sunday our theme is *Faith and Art: The Beauty of Compassion*, and our focus is the story of the Good Samaritan. In the spring we will hear about *Faith and Art: The Beauty of Our Walk with Christ*, centered on the account of Jesus and his followers on the Road to Emmaus. These sermons and exhibitions give us a chance to reflect on how scripture can speak to us through the vision it shapes in the artists in our midst.

Let us pray:

*Lord, you grant us such riches in the hearing of your Holy Word. Bless us now by the power and presence of your Holy Spirit, who speaks to our hearts and minds as we listen to your Word read and proclaimed. May your Holy Spirit speak within us, so we are moved in the compassion you have for us through Jesus Christ, and quickened to live in his love for our neighbors. Amen.*

Our scripture passage in Luke 10:25-37 begins with the words, *Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus*. I'm quick to remind you that I'm the son of a lawyer, so I know how my bread was buttered growing up and I'm guessing there are a few lawyers present today. So I'll point out at the start that it turns out well for the lawyer at the end of the story.

A "lawyer" in Jesus' time would be a scribe or other authority on matters of divine law that, given the traditions of the Israelites, translated into matters of civil law as well, and determined boundaries of ethnicity, religious, and civil practice. It is worth pointing out that in the first half of the chapter Jesus sends out seventy followers to proclaim that the Kingdom of God had come near. It turns out to be a largely successful mission. They are really stoked up when they get back. Verse 17, *The seventy returned with joy, saying, 'Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!'* Jesus rejoices with them, and offers praise to his Father for the power he has granted Jesus and his followers.

*Then, in verse 23, turning to the disciples, Jesus says to them privately, 'Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.'* This is a word of affirmation for them that the Holy Spirit has given them eyes to see and ears to hear the kingdom present in Jesus' ministry and teachings. Following in the rest of chapter 10 are stories about two people who show signs of not hearing and seeing the kingdom come, at least at first: one is the lawyer and the other is Martha.

Jesus' remedy is specific to each personality. As biblical commentator, Fred Craddock puts it: to the lawyer, Jesus says, *Go and do* and to the Martha, who is preoccupied with kitchen tasks when Jesus is guest in her house, he says, *Go and listen*.<sup>1</sup> We each have our own journey with God, and Jesus comes to each of us to meet us in our place of need.

In verse 25, the lawyer asks Jesus, *What must I do to inherit eternal life?* This is a question others have posed to Jesus as well. You may remember the rich young ruler asks the same of Jesus in the gospels of Matthew and Mark. Jesus turns the question around to the lawyer by saying to him, "You're well read in the law," by which he means the Torah, their scriptures. The lawyer answers correctly, by quoting from the *Shema*, the well-known Jewish proclamation from Deuteronomy 6, *Hear, O Israel... You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and he adds from teachings he's probably heard Jesus repeat to others, and your neighbor as yourself.*

Here is a wonderful example of a good teacher simply pulling out from the student what the student already knows. There is such great power in that process, much greater than the teacher simply stating the truth for the student. In this way, the student owns the knowledge, owns the wisdom for him or herself. Jesus says in return, *So go and do it! Was that so hard?*

This is a somewhat common theme in Jesus' teachings: pointing people to the simple answers from their own tradition in the Hebrew Scriptures—lifting up words they were in the habit of uttering in worship and prayers, but had drifted from in practice. This sounds like human nature, doesn't it?

Throughout the history of Israel, the emphasis had always been on God's love for the people through his law for them. But over time, as with any of us, there was a shift to observance of the law divorced from the love of the One who gives it; the law became simply rules observed without compassion. To have compassion literally means to "suffer with another." To come closer than arm's length distance, and seek more in life than your own comfort or advantage. To, at a minimum, enter into the troubles of another soul enough to lift their burden for an hour or a day, or even more, to even take some of their troubles onto yourself for a time, until they can get back on their feet.

It turns out that this is not merely a duty for followers of Jesus—not just another prescription for daily living—but, in fact, a blessing to the giver, and a sign that the one who serves has heard and seen that the kingdom is near in the person and the teachings of Jesus. It is a sign that you have entered into the way of Jesus, which is eternal. It's not codependence. It's compassion. *What must I do to*

*inherit eternal life?* Jesus says to those who do more speaking than acting, *Go and do*. But to those who always do and never stop to be attentive to God's presence, *Go and listen*.

To help the lawyer a bit more, Jesus does what he does so well as a teacher; he paints a picture for his mind's eye by telling a story. Jesus knows stories stick to memory. So he tells the parable of the Good Samaritan, which is so memorable that most of you could probably repeat it, if pressed, without the verses in front of you. That is the power of a story that points beyond itself to convey a common conviction or truth. It will be told for generations. One surprising aspect of this parable is how Jesus turns the story a bit on its head by making a switch with one of the usual, expected cast of characters. Jesus begins telling that first a priest from the Temple came along the road, and passed by the man in need. He then tells that a Levite, a kind of holy layman, came along next and passed by. So the lawyer, anticipating the standard formula for such stories, probably expected the next character down the chain, a regular Israelite, to now come down the road.

But there is the twist to the story; the next character is not a humble member of the congregation. That might be palatable story for the lawyer, a reminder of how the lowest Israelite is capable of goodness. No, it is not an Israelite, but a Samaritan! He is an outsider, an untouchable; definitely not someone to mix with. But it is the outsider, this Samaritan, who helps the man in need, who enters into the suffering of this poor soul in the ditch, who may have *been* an Israelite.

Surprise...it is the Israelite who needs help, grace, mercy and aid...and the Samaritan, who not only follows the law of love by nursing the man's wounds, but also takes him to shelter, and provides two days wages for his care and feeding! What to do, and what to think, when the outsider has more compassion for an insider than another insider?

Verse 36, Jesus asks the lawyer, *Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?* Good news for lawyers! He gives the right answer, saying, *The one who showed him mercy.* Jesus says, *Go...do the same.* It really is that simple.

This week I was reading a book of Celtic prayers, compiled by the Northumbrian community in northeastern England. In the section titled "Graces," or prayers before meals, is a prayer for family Shabbat (or Sabbath), which is beautiful in the way it expresses thanks to God for his provision, but even more, asks God to send to the table any one in need, in the tradition of always making space for the arrival of a stranger. I thought it might be appropriate for us as we prepare to come to the table of Jesus on this, the Lord's day.

Let us pray:

*Bless, O Lord, this food we are about to eat, and we pray you, O God, that it may be good for our body and soul, and, if there is any poor creature hungry or thirsty walking the road, may God send them in to us, so that we can share the food with them, just as Christ shares His gifts with all of us. 2*

*In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

1. Fred B. Craddock, *Luke*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 149.

2. *Celtic Daily Prayer: Prayers and Readings from the Northumbria Community* (The Northumbria Community Trust Ltd., 2002), 91.