

A Classic

Michigan Area Annual Conference
Opening Worship

May 31, 2018
Bishop David Alan Bard

Texts: Luke 10:25-37

Wow! Y'all came back. Thank you. You still look beautiful. How many of you are here for the first time? Thank you – you are just adding to the beauty.

What a difference a year makes. Harry and Megan are now married; so are our two oldest children. *Black Panther* has become the highest grossing solo superhero film of all time. Puerto Rico continues its slow recovery from the devastation of Hurricane Maria. The Kilauea volcano continues to erupt in Hawaii. Las Vegas will no longer simply be considered a place to go for a vacation or to watch a show. It will be remembered as the sight of one of the worst mass shootings in our nation's history. The name "Parkland" will no longer be primarily associated with President Kennedy and Dallas, but with a school shooting in Florida. Sante Fe is not just a city in New Mexico, but a place in Texas where another school shooting took place. Whenever "Weinstein Pictures" appears at the beginning of a movie, we will think of sexual harassment or worse, and "Me Too" is no longer a simple phrase asking to be included. Since last we gathered I have prayed for peace on the Korean peninsula, while in the Korean peninsula, and we are all still waiting to see what kind of peace might be possible. That process has been a roller coaster.

Since last we gathered for Annual Conference, the Commission on a Way Forward for The United Methodist Church has completed its work, and the Council of Bishops has made its recommendations for the 2019 General Conference. More on that later in our time together. As your bishop I have had wonderful opportunities to see more of you, and more of your

incredible work in ministry. I have met with people across the state to discuss where we are as a denomination, and will do that again in the fall. I have walked with you, and talked with you, worshipped with you and prayed with and for you. I have preached at some of your churches and written with some regularity. I hope that there have been times when I have inspired you to think more deeply, dream more imaginatively, pray more ardently, and live more joyfully and hopefully. I know there have been times when I have disappointed some of you. We have made a lot of decisions this year, and I know that not all of them please everyone.

What a difference a year makes. Last year, if you recall, I stood before you as a basket case. Today, today, I claim to be preaching a classic. What a difference a year makes! What audaciousness! I mean, who do I think I am, Bishop Michael Curry?

A classic, I'm really not referring to the sermon, though it never hurts to aim high. The story read from Luke's gospel is a classic. The late Italian writer, Italo Calvino, in his book Why Read the Classics?, offers a series of definitions of what makes a story or a book a classic. *A classic is a book which with each rereading offers as much of a sense of discovery as the first reading.... A classic is a book which has never exhausted all it has to say to its readers.... 'Your' classic is a book to which you cannot remain indifferent, and which helps you define yourself in relation or even in opposition to it.* (p.5, 7). A classic story has richness, depth, inexhaustible insight, and it helps us understand who we are. As Christians, we affirm that the Bible is a classic in these senses, whatever else we also say about it. God's Spirit continues to speak through the words of Scripture. Among the stories in the Bible, the Good Samaritan from Luke 10 is certainly a classic – in some ways two classic stories wrapped together – the parable and its context in the exchange between Jesus and a lawyer.

In the next few moments, I want to spend some time with you working this story, plumbing its depths, shaking it to listen for its echoes in our minds, hearts and souls. I want to focus on the characters in the story, for one way to keep mining the depths of a classic is to ask how the characters tell us something about ourselves. I also want to put some of the characters in context, in the sweep of the gospel. Jesus is heading toward Jerusalem (9:51), and because of that a Samaritan village turns him away. He sends out seventy ahead of him to engage in sharing the message that the Kingdom of God has come near, and to be about the work of healing and freeing. They come back with joyful reports, and Jesus calls them blessed for what they have seen, for what they have been a part of. “Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus” (10:25).

The lawyer is an expert in the Jewish law, schooled in rabbinic tradition. His question is a penetrating one, one that the rabbis surely debated. Is his testing here part of the rabbinic tradition of debate? The language suggests otherwise, suggests that he probably wants to one-up Jesus. Those who have been following the story of Jesus up to now know that this will probably not end well for the lawyer. Questions are good, are an important part of a rich spiritual life, if they are asked with openness and humility. That does not seem to be the lawyer. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Jesus turns the question back, asking what the lawyer read in the law. “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 your neighbor as yourself.” The lawyer knows his stuff, and Jesus commends him. “Do this, and you will live.” Live now, eternal life has something to do with living now.

Another question, “Who is my neighbor?” This time it is clear that the question is not asked with sincerity, openness and humility, but in order to find some kind of self-justification. Yet the question is not completely disingenuous. What limits are there to love and care? In teaching medical ethics, I used to tell my students that I had an obligation to help pay for my children’s college education that I did not have to pay for their college education. When our resources are limited, how do we choose who to help? Jesus tells a story that moves deeper than such questions, though. Questions of moral calculation, casuistry, have their place in moral discernment, the kind of moral discernment that is part of living eternal life, life lived in God’s love, life filled with God’s Spirit, but only after a more fundamental question is answered.

“A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho.” Though this road was a notoriously dangerous one, traveling on this road would not have been uncommon. This is a story about an ordinary person doing an ordinary thing – a kind of anybody, maybe someone like you or me. Tragedy befalls the man as he is attacked – stripped, beaten, left half-dead. Life does that sometimes. We may not be physically beaten, though some tragically are, but there is a lot in life that can leave us wounded, bruised and bleeding in the soul, traumatized, feeling only half-alive. An important part of today is the Memorial Service, where we remember loved ones lost, people who have shared the ministry of Jesus with us. When death comes to those we love it can feel, in the words of poet Mary Oliver, “like an iceberg between the shoulder blades” (“When Death Comes, New and Selected Poems, I, 10). Disappointment and heartbreak can leave us feeling stripped, beaten, traumatized, and half-dead. The economic stresses of modern life can leave us feeling stripped, beaten, traumatized and half-dead. The strains of

leadership can leave us feeling stripped, beaten, traumatized, and half-dead. Stretches of life can feel like that precarious road from Jerusalem to Jericho.

“Now by chance” - I like that, this is good story telling. Now by chance a priest comes, and, cue Dionne Warwick, he walks on by. “So likewise” a Levite comes, cue The James Gang, just turns his pretty head and walks away. This sermon needs a “Guardians of the Galaxy” like soundtrack.

What prompts such uncaring action? Some suppose that it had to do with purity laws, ritual uncleanness, and not coming into contact with a dead body. Yet within the Judaism of the day, caring for the wounded man, or even caring for a dead body, would have been more pressing moral obligations than following the purity code. They really have no excuse, though they may have offered a religious justification for their lack of care.. It happens. Maybe they were just afraid. Fear is a powerful motivator. Maybe they just didn’t want to get involved. What if they tried to help and the man was hurt even more? There obviously weren’t good Samaritan laws at the time. Perhaps they felt sorry for the man, but also thought it might have been his fault in some way – an undeserving wounded person. Had he taken proper precautions for his trip? Maybe he was careless about concealing his money. Maybe these two were in the grips of cynicism. What difference can my helping this one person make? How will my helping this one bruised and bleeding man change the oppressive socio-economic Roman system, or make a dent in the safety issues along this road?

Then there is the Samaritan. Samaritans had not exactly been kind to Jesus just a short time ago in Luke chapter 9. He was a Jew headed toward Jerusalem. Samaritans had their own temple at Shechem, on Mount Gerizim. There was a closeness between Temple Judaism and

Samaritanism, just enough closeness to make their animosity fierce. Samaritans had a different understanding of Scriptures, and distinct religious practices. The Samaritan Temple had been built on Gerizim in the fourth century BCE, but it was burned down in an attack by a Jewish king in 128 BCE. Herod the Great rebuilt that temple, just as he had the Jerusalem temple, but a Jewish holiday still marked the day that the Gerizim temple had been destroyed in 128.

Samaritans, from the Jewish perspective were religiously other, ethnically different. There existed a deep cultural antipathy. Those listening to Jesus might have been able to put up with his poking fun at a priest and a Levite. Poking fun at religious figures has a long history. Why did he have to spoil the story by making the Samaritan a hero?

The Samaritan is the hero of the story. He sees the man, stripped, beaten, left half dead, and he cares. His first response is to be moved by compassion, it is a deeply felt, heart-felt response. That's the deeper issue, more fundamental than moral calculation, which is often necessary. Eternal life, love of God and neighbor, has something to do with being able to be moved by the hurt and pain of others, even others who are other. Eternal life, beyond what it means for life after death, is intended to be a quality of life here and now characterized by a certain quality of heart and soul, a heart and soul capable of being deeply moved.

Jesus gets to ask the last question. "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" The lawyer knew, though he finds the idea of a Samaritan as the hero of the story so difficult that he cannot identify him directly – "the one who." We don't always get to choose those from whom we learn. At some level, he probably knew his question about neighborliness was going to lead in this direction. The dynamic with love is not so much about which neighbors do I love, it is that love creates

neighbors. If you want to know eternal life, you have to have that kind of love of God and neighbor that creates neighbors – creates neighbors across boundaries, across otherness, across antipathy, beyond prejudice. *Neighbors are rich and poor. Neighbors are black and white. Neighbors are near and far away. Jesu, Jesu, fill us with your love, show us how to serve the neighbors we have from you.*

The story is a classic, but right now it might feel as if this sermon is another kind of classic- a Jackson Pollack – splash here, dash there. Where is the center? Let me bring it on home, cue Sam Cooke.

In his recently published book Our Purpose is Love, United Methodist theologian David Field writes, “God has a mission in the world, and love is at the heart of that mission” (19). We know that, and we can always know that more deeply. Three quick points to elaborate and finish up.

God has a mission in the world, and love is at the heart of that mission. We are both recipients of God’s love **and** bearers of God’s love. We are both the person by the side of the road – bruised, bleeding, wounded, stripped, emptied of dignity, traumatized, in need of help, **and** persons walking on the road of life whose hearts and souls see those in need as neighbors to love. When we are on the side of the road, hurting and wounded, we really don’t care much about who it is that is reaching out to help bind our wounds. We won’t much care if the person offering help is the person we were most afraid of before being traumatized – an undocumented person, a Muslim, a Jew, an Arab, a gay man, a lesbian woman, a transgender person, a Sanders Democrat, a Trump Republican, a religious progressive, a religious conservative – anyone whose name we can barely utter could be a source of healing, a conduit

of grace, unless of course we would rather die than accept their help. God has a mission in the world, and love is at the heart of that mission – a love that crosses boundaries, shatters expectations, a love stronger than cynicism, tougher than fear, a love that can be wild and wasteful and wonderfully surprising, a love that creates neighbors and accepts neighborly help whoever its source.

God has a mission in the world, and love is at the heart of that mission. Let's admit that saying this does not untangle all complexities. Love can be complex, but we should never use the complexities of love to avoid being moved in heart and soul by the hurts and wounds of the world. Theologian Robert Neville argues that kindness is at the heart of Christian faith and life, acknowledging that he is using kindness as a kind of synonym for love. *Sometimes is it hard to tell in what kindness consists. Whether a social welfare system is ultimately kind if it creates a long-term dependent class of people is a debatable point.... But some obvious and up-front meanings of kindness should be affirmed before stumbling on hard cases. These include being generous, sympathetic, willing to help those in immediate need, and ready to play roles for people on occasions of suffering, trouble, joy and celebration that might more naturally be played by family or close friends who are absent. To be kind is also to be courteous, an extremely important and difficult virtue in a society as multifarious as ours.* (Symbols of Jesus, xviii). Love asks complex questions, requires deep thinking, but prior to moral calculation and casuistry is a heart and soul open to the hurts and pains and wounds and injustices of the world. One important reason we remember those who have served with us and among us is to acknowledge that we aspire to be a community of love. We are grateful for the love they

shared with us, and we commit ourselves to God's mission in the world, the heart of which is love.

The classic story of the Good Samaritan echoes deeply, reverberates profoundly, reminding us again and again of what we already know but can always know more deeply – God has a mission in the world, and love is at the heart of that mission. You want to know what eternal life is about, what life lived in the power of God's Spirit is about – it's about love – love for God, love that creates neighbors. Being part of that mission is personally transforming, for it invites us to let Jesus form in us hearts and souls that respond to the pain, hurt, wounds and injustices in the world – hearts and souls that are moved deeply to care. Being part of that mission is world-shaking. I know that because I heard it at the recent royal wedding. *When love is the way – unselfish, sacrificial, redemptive, when love is the way, then no child would go to bed hungry in this world ever again. When love is the way, we will let justice roll down like a mighty stream and righteousness like an ever-flowing brook. When love is the way poverty will become history. When love is the way the earth will become a sanctuary. When love is the way we will lay down our swords and shields down by the riverside to study war no more. When love is the way there's plenty good room, plenty good room for all of God's children.* (Bishop Michael Curry, wedding of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex)

God has a mission in the world, and love is at the heart of that mission. We are here, beginning a new way of being together, one conference. We are here to renew our commitment to this mission of God. We are here to renew our commitment to each other to support each other in this shared mission. We are here to hear stories about being engaged. "Engaged," that's a love word. We gather to share stories of love, so as to be inspired anew to

love. It is good to begin with a classic. God has a mission in the world, and love is at the heart of that mission, a love that changes us, a love that will not leave us alone, a love that creates neighbors. As we begin this new Michigan Conference, let's be about this mission of God, this work of love, together. Amen.