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Luke 10:25-37

“Risky Business”

We should be grateful to Jesus. For when Jesus talks about what is essential for inheriting eternal life, he never says that we have to have our theology perfectly hammered out, or that we cannot have questions or doubts about the faith, or we have to subscribe to four neat and tidy spiritual laws that pave the way to salvation. No, when Jesus speaks of inheriting eternal life, he generally gives us doable, manageable, achievable kinds of things, the sort of stuff that every one of us gathered this morning could do, if we wanted to, before the day is up.

Luke tells us that an attorney, a lawyer, does what lawyers do well, he stands up and puts Jesus to the test. The case being tried is the case of eternal life. The lawyer demands to know what we must do if we are to attain eternal life. Jesus, being used to legalists trying to pin him down on one thing or another, deflects the question. “Well, you’ve passed the bar exam,” says Jesus, “what is written in the law?” “Love God with all you are and love your neighbor as yourself,” the lawyer answers. “Correct. If you do this, you will live.” But this attorney is not satisfied with the first answer, and so he calls for a point of clarification: The God part he’s got. But who, he wants to know, is my neighbor? Attorneys ask questions. Jesus, being the good preacher that he is, when explaining truth, when trying to get a point across, launches into a story that we know as the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Now, I admit, when I saw that the Good Samaritan was on the morning’s schedule, I wanted to walk by on the other side of the road. The Good Samaritan, a story so familiar to mainline Protestants that most of you began to glaze over about the time the Levite went about his own way. We know, great story. Go and do likewise. Even folks who haven’t set foot in a church since they were ten-year-olds in Ms. Bell’s Sunday School class know this story. But perhaps it’s precisely when stories seem so familiar that they deserve another look.

What grabbed me this time through was not that the Samaritan helped the guy, and not that the priest didn’t, but that the Samaritan took a risk on someone else! He risked something; he got his hands dirty. He let his life get mixed up in the messiness of somebody else’s life. He didn’t know where the robbers were. Maybe they were hiding in the ditch on the other side of the road, or hanging out around the next bend. Just ask the average Iraqi citizen or US soldier in Baghdad; ambush is everywhere. The easy way out would be to keep everything at arms’ length, stay safe, stay on the other side of the road, don’t get involved, mind your own business, let somebody else handle it. But no, the Samaritan got involved, got mixed up with a life in need; he took a risk.

The story leaves me to assume that the Priest and Levite didn’t stop to help that man by the side of the road because deep down they were afraid. They didn’t want their lives to change, headed in one direction, they didn’t want to get involved, change course. Life is easier that way. Maybe he was diseased, lying there in the gutter. Perhaps it would require more than just calling the ambulance, but riding to the hospital, covering a medical bill or two, finding some food and shelter.

Samuel Wells suggested that if the US congress set up a committee to report on the disquieting events along the Jerusalem-Jericho road that day, they would say the following:

“We conclude that the Samaritan was either a dangerous criminal or a naïve fool. If everyone followed his example, we would all soon be half-dead and at the mercy of robbers. The only appropriate model of engagement with issues of social deprivation is that of the priest and Levite, who acted with dignity and forbearance. We honor people of their caliber who establish careful codes of conduct, respect the privacy of the individual, follow health and safety legislation to the letter, and do not take on tasks that conflict with their roles. They make society what it is today” (*The Christian Century*, 6/19/04).

And studies say that the society we’ve made is lonelier, more isolated, and more depressed than ever before. It’s a society in which forces seem keen on keeping us apart. Good fences make good neighbors.

We live lives that seek to reduce our risk of involvement with one another. With all our progress we have become trapped by our fears, the fear of involvement, the fear of risking our lives on someone else.

In 1942, Clarence Jordan, a young New Testament Scholar, read this parable of the Good Samaritan. Now you and I we read this parable and we come up with all kinds of creative interpretations, rationalizations, to keep us from doing what Jesus says, to keep from getting involved. But Jordan, he read the Bible, and actually believed he was supposed to go and do it. Jordan formed a Christian community there in rural Georgia where blacks and whites would live together, would learn to be neighbor, to be in community with one another.

When Jordan was asked how he overcame his fears, the barrage of attacks and persecution, the threats on his own life and his family and friends, Jordan said: “Fear is the polio of the soul that keeps us from living by faith.” In 1969, the year Jordan died, that little interracial Christian community in Americus, Georgia began a housing development program we now know as Habitat for Humanity.

How different from most of our own lives. Our modern mantra. Don’t get attached. I’ll mind my business and you mind yours. As we have become less and less involved with one another’s lives we as a people have become more and more isolated.

Risk used to be exciting, adventurous, but we have reduced it to a best-selling board game; something to play, to detach from, admire and analyze from a distance, but not, it seems, to live.

The lawyer from Luke’s gospel would fit in well in our times. He doesn’t want to get his hands dirty, he wants to engage Jesus in a question and answer dialogue, a heady debate about theology: “what is eternal life?” he asks. But Jesus won’t be a subject to be debated through in philosophy 101. Jesus says life, life is this: Go. Take a risk. Cross the road. Go, be a neighbor to someone else, especially someone who is up against it, who is poor, lonely, hurting; we might even discover the healing of our own loneliness.

Bishop Ken Goodson had been asked to preach at a big downtown church. On Saturday night some key members of the congregation took him out to dinner at a rather plush local restaurant. After the food came, Bishop Goodson, a rather large man with a deep baritone voice, announced that he would say grace. Noticing the waitress standing near the table, as they circled hands, he invited her to take part in the prayer. He gave God thanks for all their blessings, for the food and company, and then he said, “and thank you O God for this young woman who has

served us so well, for her gentle care and attentiveness, and if she is hurting in any way tonight, put your arms around her, make her know how much you love her. Amen.”

When the prayer was over the young waitress had tears rolling down her face. “Today has been the worst day of my life,” she said. “My husband recently left me; my little boy is sick. I’m so alone and afraid. How did you know?” How did Goodson know? How do any of us know? Because deep down, there is only one answer to our own loneliness, and that is community. Taking a risk, opening the circle to someone else, especially to someone who is hurting, someone who is poor. Jurgen Moltmann said “the opposite of poverty is not property. The opposite of them both is community.” The Levite and Priest, went on down the road, on their side, isolated and alone. But the Samaritan took a risk, and in the process, found the cure for his own loneliness, he found community. Jesus says, he found life.

And this is what Christianity claims about the way that God relates to us! God does not stay away, up there in his heavenly fortress, thinking about humanity, wondering if we’d ever get it straight, sighing over the mess we’ve made of the world, of our lives. God crosses the road, opens the circle. God takes a risk with us, rushes towards us. When we celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion we believe that Jesus is not only re-telling this story again, but is playing the Samaritan’s leading role.

An outsider coming to us, wrapped up in the disguise of bread and wine, Jesus is taking a risk, on us, pushing his way into our lives, getting down in the ditch with us who are wounded and hurting, coming at us in flesh and blood, inviting us to get involved with him.

Now here in Duke Chapel, communion is a rather formal affair, we all get in line and the organ plays beautiful music as we rotate out of the pews clockwise just so. Everyone is polite, steady, no one gets up before the ushers signal. I went on a mission trip to the southern mountains of Honduras a few years ago with some Duke students.

We were down there, trying to be faithful to the Gospel, to offer a week of our lives doing something we should be doing all the time according to Jesus, to be in service and in relationship with the poor, all the while wondering if our hot sweaty work was doing more harm than good. At the end of that trip we gathered on Sunday morning for a final worship service in the dusty little community church up on the hill.

I remember being in awe, shocked, after the priest said the prayers over the host and invited the people forward to receive the body and blood of Jesus, how these people who had next to nothing, whose lives were filled with hardship and pain that most of us can only imagine, clambered forward en masse, no lines, no order, no ushers, just running to Jesus.

And when they got to the priest and put out their hands, they clung to that bread as if someone had placed a million dollars in their cupped palms - as if the secret of life itself had been revealed to them. I sat there in the back in my orderly kind of way, watching, taking it in from a distance, on the sidelines and as I watched my Honduran brothers and sisters, rushing forward, in spite of everything, staking their lives on the body and blood of our Lord, I thought to myself, I’d give my right arm for faith like that!

Wouldn’t you?