

## **“THREE BLIND DOGS”**

Sermon Preached by Rev. Dr. Jon M. Walton

July 24, 2016

Scripture: Psalm 82; Luke 10:25-37

This year's theme, “An eye for an eye leaves everyone blind” is almost a tautology it is so patently obvious. “Yes,” we think, “and what else is there to say?” Of course the fact that the meaning of the theme is plainly obvious will not keep eleven of us from holding forth on this topic for twenty minutes each Sunday for nine more Sundays.

The blind *blinding* the blind or *leading* the blind poking out eyes everywhere is a pretty gruesome thought. Biblically not unheard of, however. We have the story of the men trying to force their way into Lot's house in Sodom who were struck blind for their evil intentions. And Samson whose eyes were gouged out by the Philistines who nonetheless brought down the pillars of the temple.

And then there are those lovely healing stories in the gospels that speak of miraculous recovery of sight to the blind.

I have to confess that I have become a little self-conscious about stories that relate to blindness in scripture. I have seen the emotional stress and discouragement of people who develop macular degeneration, cataracts, or who are partially or totally blind. One member of my congregation in particular comes to mind. She is a brilliant chemist, she is a researcher and is aided by a Seeing Eye dog who guides her every step.

Whenever these miraculous healing stories appear in the lectionary or are read in worship, I always feel like I should apologize to Eileen, or say something in advance to her about the fact that there is going to be another one of those sight healing stories this Sunday. Because Eileen has been blind since being a child and if it doesn't make her self-conscious about her lack of sightedness, I feel self-conscious about it for her sake. She's never received that miracle of restored sight in her life. And while she says, wisely, that there are several levels at which all of us see and don't see what's around us, it bothers me more than it seems to bother her that these stories appear in the Bible as they do.

I have also learned a few things about blindness from my dogs. In our household there are three blind dogs and one deaf dog as well. The deaf dog, Keller (named for Helen Keller) is easy to care for. He is needful of attention and constantly underfoot, but he stays well within what I would otherwise call earshot.

But the blind dogs, Charles, Butter, and Rocky are all rescue dogs. All our dogs are rescue dogs in fact. And what I have discovered is that while one is *totally* blind, the other two have the ability to see some shadows and so, use what they have to help the others. It may be the blind leading the blind, but they steer each other to their food, move together in somewhat

close proximity, are aware of each other's presence, and have a heightened awareness of sound, smell, touch, and taste that compensates for their loss of sight.

So I suppose the first thing I would like to say about blindness is that while I would not choose to be blind, I am very aware having lived around three blind dogs that the blind compensate for what is missing and learn to maximize other senses in order to maintain contact with as much of the world around them as possible. In other words, the blind *can* lead the blind because the other senses help to fill in the gaps.

Which brings me to say something about our texts for today, the reading from Psalm 82 and the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Psalm 82, is a plea for justice and bears an appeal to God,

To give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute, Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.

...a theme which is played out in the parable of the Good Samaritan where justice for the weak and the lowly is enacted.

It's a fascinating parable because the very name of it is an ironic juxtaposition of words that no self-respecting person among Jesus' people would have put together... "good" and "Samaritan." It represents something of the tension that is inherent in any apparent conflict of interests, or prejudiced way of seeing. Jews and Samaritans were people who saw each other in such a fixed and stereotypical way, longtime enemies dating back to the time of Jacob. Nothing good could come out of Samaria. Everybody knew that, at least everybody not from Samaria.

So on the one hand, the story of the Good Samaritan on the face of it is a story of extraordinary kindness, a person who is himself an outcast, who reaches out to one who is in need. It's a story that seems sweet, almost naïve given the harshness of the world that we have seen in recent weeks, a season when we have been blinded by race, power, political opportunism, and stereotyping of one another. A season when it has been difficult to overlook how we see someone who is not like us, and at the same time see how they are indeed like us.

In a sense the parable of the Good Samaritan is a retelling of a familiar tale well known in the Middle East according to some scholars, folk stories that begin with familiar dramatic personae. Today these stories would be comparable to an old saw about a priest, a rabbi, and a minister who were out playing golf, or sitting at a bar, or in a boat together... and we know from the indication of the three that are together that a comparison is underway which will play into stereotypes. In Jesus' time the familiar set up began, "There was a priest, and a Levite and common Jew who were walking down the road one day." And everyone who knew these comparisons knew they led to a predictable tag line. The hero would prove to be the common Jew. It was always a send up of the priest and the Levite whose foil was the faithful person who simply did what was right as opposed to what was required by the law.

The priest would be so wrapped up in scrupulous observance, following the letter of the law, seeing only the Torah in front of him, that he would miss some humanizing need, a conflict between the lawful thing and the righteous thing.

The Levite raised the ante in the story. Levites were the upright priestly caste. They were the righteous ones, the faithful, tried and tested ones. But like any righteous group there were also those who were their detractors, who saw their humanity, their Achilles heels, and who were not above poking a bit of fun at the predicament of being hyper-religious when practical sensibilities and a larger vision of things was needed.

“Once upon a time there were three men going down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho,” said Jesus. One was a priest, one was a Levite, (“Aah,” said Jesus’ listeners in their minds) *and one was a common Jew*, the last being the truly righteous one, a common person who would do the right thing in every circumstance and thereby expose the hypocrisy of the religious.

Except that this time, Jesus told the story differently. He expanded the vision of his followers. There was a man who was mugged and robbed and left lying by the side of the road looking half dead. And that’s an important detail. *He appeared to be half dead.*

Along came a priest, on his way from the temple, and knowing that it is forbidden to touch the dead if one is a priest, he passed by on the other side of the road, thus fulfilling the law.

Next, a Levite saw the man lying in the road and being a holy person he needed to remain ritually clean. He could not cross the road, touch this man who looked dead and still perform Levitical functions at the Temple. So he too, passed by on the other side. Both men were, therefore, doing what was right in the eyes of religious law.

We know who the next person, the truly righteous person will be. It will be the common Jew, who will lay aside custom and law and simply do what is humane and right.

Except that the one who stops is not a common Jew, but a loathsome Samaritan, a much despised and mistrusted ethnic and religious outsider to those who sat listening to Jesus’ story. It is the Samaritan, not the common Jew, who proves the hero of the story.

He sees the man lying on the side of the road half dead, and Luke tells us “he had compassion on him.” So he stopped and got off his donkey, bound up the wounds of the injured man, placed him on his beast, and took him to an inn where he paid for a few nights lodging, some food and the good care of the innkeeper.

At the end of the parable Jesus asks the lawyer, “Which of these three, do you think, proved neighbor to the man who fell among robbers?” And the lawyer rightly responded, “The one who showed mercy on him.” And Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

The whole thing is wrapped around the larger question asked by the lawyer which was, “How do I inherit eternal life?” to which Jesus says, “What is written in the law?” And the lawyer says, the first two commandments, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, *and* your neighbor as yourself.” The question that leads to the telling of this parable is therefore bedrock important. It is a matter of life and death. “How do I inherit eternal life?” asks the lawyer. You don’t get much more existential or foundational than that question. We’re onto something big here.

*The person who is “neighbor,” the one we must love as our own selves is a Samaritan, the one we find it most difficult to love, the one with whom we have something in common but whom we may hate, certainly the one whom we fear because so much of who he is, is wrapped in stereotype and laden with misunderstanding.*

Over the years I have known and preached about who that Samaritan is. Different times and seasons suggest differing interpretations as to who that neighbor to whom we do not wish to be neighbor is. But the common thread is that he is the one whom we are least likely to embrace, the one whom we see as our enemy. To the radical Jihadist – anyone who cannot recite the Koran – and even some who can. To a Palestinian – a Jew. To Israelis – Palestinians. To police – well, it’s complicated isn’t it? We are so clear sighted about who that other is that see them all in the same way, and therein lies the problem Jesus identified.

Sometimes there are those who act as neighbors to one another and break open a new possibility.

In the midst of all the hardening ways we see ourselves and judge others, I ran across a sign of hope in the New York Times of all places. Maybe you saw it.<sup>1</sup> Ali Shroukh, a medical doctor, a Palestinian, was driving with his brothers along a West Bank road a week ago Friday when they came upon a car that had flipped over onto its roof. A large vehicle with room for several passengers easily identifiable as belonging to a Jewish settler.

Palestinian gunmen had fired on the car, killing the driver Rabbi Michael Mark, a father of ten children, and critically injuring his wife who was in the front passenger seat. Daa Hadid, reporting for the *Times* wrote, “Dr. Shroukh did not realize that he was witnessing the aftermath of a terrorist attack. His instinct was simply to help.”<sup>2</sup>

His response was an act of kindness in a conflict that is often bereft of it, particularly amid the violence of the past nine months, when Palestinians have killed more than 30 Israelis.”

Over 210 Palestinians have also been killed, many while committing an attack or intending to do so.

Earlier rescue efforts had pulled one of the daughters from the back of the car and Dr. Shroukh administered pressure with a towel on the wounded girl’s arm, then he

and his brother rescued the seriously injured mother from the front seat by breaking open the window. Soon an Israeli ambulance came to take the victims away.

Then the reality of the conflict sank in: A Palestinian medic urged Dr. Shroukh and his brothers to leave.

This was an attack, not a car accident... Israeli soldiers could arrest him, suspecting him of being an accomplice because he was not dressed as a doctor and was covered in blood. Vengeful Jewish settlers could attack him, thinking he was the gunman.

The brothers drove away. Even so, Dr. Shroukh said, he left only after he was sure the victims were cared for. It was his duty to help, even if he thought he was at risk. "It doesn't matter if somebody is a settler, a Jew or an Arab," he said. "Thank God we helped them."

After leaving the scene, Dr. Shroukh and his brothers drove on to the Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, for Eid prayers to mark the end of Ramadan.

At Rabbi Mark's funeral, angry settlers called for revenge, but the Rabbi's sons asked them to leave. And when some people described Arabs as "murderous" and "scum of the earth," on the Facebook page of Rabbi's Mark's daughter-in-law, she responded by writing that "The Palestinians stayed with them in those difficult moments. I think you should write terrorist, and not Arabs."<sup>3</sup>

Dr. Shroukh is Muslim, Palestinian, and like the Samaritan in the parable Jesus told, he broke with the expected, the conventional wisdom, the safe thing to do and did what was humane and compassionate, showing mercy in his life and in his faith.

In recent weeks we have been saturated with a world gone violent. St. Paul and Baton Rouge, Dallas, Nice, Bangladesh, Istanbul, Baghdad, Orlando. And I am struck by the question what causes a person to hate so much that they leave home packed in explosives or loaded with automatic weapons, or shoots white police officers with such intended purpose that what has happened, has happened? Isn't it that a person no longer sees that other as neighbor, but as enemy?

Violence is stalking our world these days. It barges into a Paris café and shoots people having an evening meal on a warm summer night. It hides in a tall building and shoots police officers on the street below. It takes a taxi to the departures area of the airport and detonates suicide bombs where people are thinking of nothing more than going on honeymoons and taking vacation days and traveling to visit relatives. It drives through a crowd of people a mile long who are watching Bastille Day fireworks.

I suppose it is the horror and the violence that is so stunning to all of us, the unrelenting mercilessness of it, not to mention the racism, the assumption that *the other* is always dangerous. Our lives, like new lenses, have adjusted to this new normal of atrocity, violence, outrage, and anger. And it does not help that this is an election year and that reason and wisdom are in short supply fueling the fires of inhumanity in response to inhumanity.

I want to suggest in this time of tyrannical unsettling violence in our world that acts of mercy and deeds of compassion at whatever scale and level are what we are meant to do and how we are called to live as people of faith. We must open our eyes and see the barriers we are building by stereotyping one another, seeing our neighbors in fixed and unbending ways.

We are meant to demonstrate as did the Samaritan of Jesus' parable the justice and mercy of God. We are meant to do as did Dr. Shroukh: prove ourselves neighbor to those who are our neighbors. Muslim brothers and sisters, Jewish brothers and sisters, people of no faith, and people of great faith, people across racial lines and ethnic differences whom we are meant to see as neighbors.

To the extent that we can live as Jesus lived in relationship to others; that is our calling. And yes, Jesus is strangely out of step with his world... with our world. He seems like a lamb among wolves. He taught that we should turn the other cheek, that if someone takes our coat we should give them our cloak as well. He is the one who forgave those who put him to death, saying, "Father forgive them." "I was stranger," he said, "and you welcomed me."

Of what kind of world do we hope to be a part? The kind of world that mistrusts everyone, that closes our borders and our lives to one another, that sees everyone as a potential threat? Or do we long for a world, marked by compassion, loving kindness, and mercy?

Taking Jesus at his word, I think we are meant to see one another in ways that exceed our expectations and break open our fixed notions of who is whom. Who do we see as neighbor and who is the stranger?

Which one of the three proved neighbor to the man who was left by the side of the road?" asked Jesus. The priest? The Levite? Or the Samaritan? "The one who showed him mercy," said the lawyer to Jesus. "Go and do likewise."

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<sup>1</sup> I am quoting liberally from this story using *The NY Times* article, "Jewish Settlers, Attacked, Needed Help. A Palestinian Doctor Didn't Hesitate." Diaa Hadid, NY Times, Wednesday July 6, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.