



Grace, in Unexpected Packaging

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Sean Lanigan
The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost ~ July 14, 2019*

Deuteronomy 30:9-14

YHWH will make you prosper in all the work of your hands, and in the fruit of your body, of your livestock and of your lands. YHWH will once again delight in you and make you prosperous, just as God delighted in your ancestors and prospered them, if you obey YHWH, your God, and keep the commandments and decrees that are written in this Book of the Law, and return to YHWH with all your heart and soul. For this Law that I give to you today is not too difficult for you, nor is it beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven, so that you need to ask yourselves, "Who will go up to heaven for us and bring it down to us, so that we may hear it and keep it?" Nor is it beyond the seas, so that you need to wonder, "Who will cross the seas for us and bring it back to us, so that we may hear it and keep it?" No, the word of God is very near to you; it is in your mouth, and in your heart, so that you can keep it.

Psalm 25:1-9

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| 1 To you, O God, I lift up my soul;
my God, I put my trust in you; *
let me not be humiliated,
nor let my enemies triumph over me. | 7 Gracious and upright are you; *
therefore you teach sinners in your way. |
| 2 Let none who look to you be put to shame; *
let the treacherous be disappointed in their schemes. | 8 You guide the humble in doing right *
and teach your way to the lowly. |
| 3 Show me your ways, O God, *
and teach me your paths. | 9 All your paths are love and faithfulness *
to those who keep your covenant and your testimonies. |
| 4 Lead me in your truth and teach me, *
for you are the God of my salvation;
in you have I trusted all the day long. | 13 All day long they mock me *
and say to me, "Where now is your God?" |
| 5 Remember, O God, your compassion and love, *
for they are from everlasting. | 14 Why are you so full of heaviness, O my soul, *
and why are you so disquieted within me? |
| 6 Remember not the sins of my youth and my
transgressions; *
remember me according to your love | 15 Put your trust in God, *
for I will yet give thanks to the Holy One,
who is the help of my countenance, and my God. |

Colossians 1:1-14

From Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Timothy, To the holy and faithful sisters and brothers in Christ at Colossae: Grace and peace to you from our Loving God. We always give thanks to the Abba God of our Savior Jesus Christ whenever we pray for you, ever since we heard about your faith in Christ Jesus and the love you show toward all the holy ones, because of the hope stored up for you in heaven. It is only recently that you heard of this, when it was announced in the message of the truth. The Good News which has reached you is spreading all over the world; it is producing the same fruit there as it did among you, ever since you heard about God's grace and understood what it really is. Epaphras, who taught you, is one of our closest coworkers and a faithful laborer of Christ on our behalf, and it was he who told us all about your love in the Spirit. Therefore, since the day we heard about you, we've been praying for you unceasingly and asking that you attain the full knowledge of God's will, in perfect wisdom and spiritual understanding. Then you'll lead a life worthy and pleasing to our God in every way. You'll multiply good works of every sort and grow in the knowledge of God. And by the might of God's glory you'll be endowed with the strength needed to stand fast and endure joyfully whatever may happen. Thanks be to God for having made you worthy to share in the inheritance of the holy ones in light! God rescued us from the authority of darkness and brought us into the reign of Jesus, God's Only Begotten. And

it is through Jesus that we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Luke 10:25-37

An expert on the Law stood up to put Jesus to the test and said, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit everlasting life?" Jesus answered, "What is written in the law? How do you read it?" The expert on the Law replied: "You must love the Most High God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself." Jesus said, "You have answered correctly. Do this and you'll live." But the expert on the Law, seeking self-justification, pressed Jesus further: "And just who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "There was a traveler going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, who fell prey to robbers. The traveler was beaten, stripped naked, and left half-dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road; the priest saw the traveler lying beside the road, but passed by on the other side. Likewise there was a Levite who came the same way; this one, too, saw the afflicted traveler and passed by on the other side. "But a Samaritan, who was taking the same road, also came upon the traveler and, filled with compassion, approached the traveler and dressed the wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then the Samaritan put the wounded person on a donkey, went straight to an inn and there took care of the injured one. The next day the Samaritan took out two silver pieces and gave them to the innkeeper with the request, 'Look after this person, and if there is any further expense, I'll repay you on the way back.' "Which of these three, in your opinion, was the neighbor to the traveler who fell in with the robbers?" The answer came, "The one who showed compassion." Jesus replied, "Then go and do the same."

So often, when I talk with families of our younger children, they tell me that one of their primary motives for bringing their children to church is that they want their children to become good people. They hope that the church might help support them in this character-building endeavor. And while this certainly isn't a bad reason to be at church, I always have to resist the urge to reality-check their hope that being at church will somehow instill virtue in their children by osmosis. Because I don't necessarily think that church has as much of a stranglehold on "goodness" as many wish it did. Sure, there are a lot of really good Christians out there, inspiring people doing inspiring things, but on the whole, we Christians tend to be just as fallible as everyone else.

At our best, however, Christians know and confess this fallibility. We admit to our selfishness, our greed, and our grudges. And then we ask God, along with our sisters and brothers in Christ, for help in overcoming these things that keep us distant from one another.

To be a Christian, I think, is to recognize—in a clear-eyed and ruthlessly honest way—how far from God's dream our lives tend to be. Because there's a hope in this level of honesty: a hope that springs from our truthful confession, a hope that springs from the act of asking for help. For God's help. For one another's help.

But of course, asking for and receiving help just isn't something many of us like to do. We prefer to be the helper, rather than the one who is being helped. We relish the power of offering help, but hate the powerlessness of needing it.

And yet, at the root of our Christian story, is the fundamental truth of just how much help we need to make it through this life.

We are so much less put together than we'd like for others to think. We so often feel as if we're coming apart at the seams, just managing to hold it all together. So when we come to a story like the Good Samaritan, a story which on its surface seems to be asking us: "are you willing to stop and help a person in great need?"—we might get a bit curious about which role the story is inviting us to occupy. Do you tend to identify with the priest, the Levite, the Samaritan? Perhaps the innkeeper? Or just maybe...with the traveler lying on the side of the road?

As the great preacher Richard Lischer reads it:

"When Jesus first told [this] story, his hearers would [likely] have identified not with the helper but with the helpee, [with] the man in the ditch. It's the ordinary Jewish layperson on an ordinary little trip who winds up in the ditch.¹

Thus, Jesus is saying, "It's somebody like you – why, it is you – you are the man or the woman in the ditch. You are the church in the ditch, the nation in the ditch."

For the traveler lying in the ditch in need of rescue, then, different questions tend to be central. Not: will I help
But: is anyone coming to help? Will I accept help from anyone who comes along? And, how badly do I want to be rescued?

Of course, these are hard questions. For many of us, it's difficult to even begin to put ourselves in the place of the wounded traveler, the one lying helpless on the side of the road. We find it so hard to let go of automatically reading ourselves as the presumptive benefactors in texts like these. Either as failed benefactors, like the priest and Levite, or as successful ones, like the Samaritan. Either way, this is where we tend to see ourselves: in the role of the benefactor, the helper. But it doesn't have to be this way. This is not our only interpretive option.

At various times in our lives, many of us will end up just as desperate and needy as the wounded man lying on the side of the road. And in that place of desperation, as the parable of the Good Samaritan shows us, the person who comes to save us just might be the last person we'd ever expect, or ever want. The person who comes to save us just might be the kind of person that we have been taught "to patronize, to feel guilty about, to ignore, or even to despise... Can you imagine someone you've been taught to despise [coming to be] your salvation? .Can you imagine [allowing yourself being tended to, touched] by such a person as that?"ⁱⁱ

You might wonder, of course, why the Samaritans would have been so despised by Jesus' Jewish audience? What made the Samaritan such an unexpected and unwelcome savior.

The theologian and preacher, Sam Wells, lays out the dynamics quite succinctly:

"A 'Samaritan' is someone from Samaria, a place where in minds of everyone listening, they did their religion wrong, in a distorted and repellent way. [And if you think this is the sort of] prejudice you're naturally too enlightened to fall into – you're missing the challenge. You need to

substitute for the Samaritan someone to whom you have a genuine, serious objection.”

Not...the good Samaritan, but the good homophobe. The good racist. The good drug lord. The good terrorist.”ⁱⁱⁱ

So, who might that be for you? From whom would it be incredibly difficult for you to receive help? Who would you never expect to offer a helping hand? These are the kinds of questions, I think, that the parable of the Good Samaritan raises. Who are the unexpected, perhaps even reviled, sources of grace in our lives? Who are the rescuers who we could never have imagined or asked for?

Jesus, of course, is telling us, that these are precisely the people through whom God likes to work. That this is what we should learn expect from God. That we should learn to expect the unexpected. Always.

We wish it weren't so, don't we? That God didn't have to be so contrarian. That things could more often be what they seem. Good or Bad—not in between. God introduces so much ambiguity into the picture. God convolutes what we think we know, destabilizes our perception. Refuses to be bound by our categories. Often sends help in the least desirable packages.

But it's really awfully good news, deep down, isn't it? That goodness can come from anywhere, at anytime. That we don't have to walk through the world as if danger is around every corner, with no help in sight.

Of course, help has already come our way. Just this kind of unexpected help. Help so terrifying that we crucified it. Help so terrifyingly real that death could not contain it.

You see, Jesus was telling a story about himself in the parable of the Good Samaritan. He was telling a story about help that had come in the wrong package—all wrong—to people who didn't really think they needed much help in the first place. People a lot like us. People who, as Sam Wells enumerates:

...long for relationship, for forgiveness, for reconciliation, for eternal life. Which we would be happy to receive from the priest or the Levite...those so much like us, from our own social background. Those who have security, social esteem, resources. But as the story is telling us, they can't really help us, won't really help us. They can't give us what we so desperately need.^{iv}

Yet there is one who can help. There is one who comes to meet us in our deepest need, in our darkest places, in the territories of our minds and hearts that seem all but godforsaken. Indeed, Jesus enters into these places with us. He is not afraid. Because these places are not foreign to him. He has known great suffering, too.

And when he comes to meet us in those places of terror and heartache, I wonder, will we have the courage to receive him? Are we prepared to receive healing and forgiveness and eternal life *from him*? From someone who didn't amount to much in the eyes of the world? Who lost everything? Whose friends deserted him? Who died the most shameful of deaths?

It takes humility, doesn't it? It's humbling to receive from one who appears to be such an utter failure. Yet in receiving from one like Him, we may find ourselves strangely and beautifully liberated. Liberated from expectations about who does and doesn't have the capacity to help. Liberated to see goodness in the most unexpected people and to receive the gifts they offer. Liberated to see the world with hope. Hope in one another. Hope for one another.

We need so much more help than we've dared to ask for. And the person who can help us might be much closer and much different than the person we think we need.

I pray that we will have eyes to see the help that comes to us in these unexpected packages. The help that just might save us.

Grace, upon grace, upon grace....in the most unexpected of packages.

Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.faithandleadership.com/view-ditch>

ⁱⁱ <https://chapel-archives.oit.duke.edu/documents/sermons/July11WhatMustIDotoInheritEternalLife.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b08cqxgt>

