



## “Mission: Our Community.”

Luke 10:25-37

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May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts and the actions of our lives be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

I once had a friend named Ron. Ron had a particular way of articulating his words. He didn't speak often but when he spoke you had to really listen to understand what he was saying. One word that remains firmly in my memory bank is “fothy.” You see I worked in recreation for one summer and one of my projects was to help people whose social skills did not come easily, to develop active social lives. And one activity that Ron enjoyed more than most was going out for “fothy.” So there we would sit, at the Elite Restaurant and drink our “fothy.”

During those years that I worked in group homes and in the community with folks on the margins of society because of their mental disabilities, I learned many huge lessons about what it means to be human. People would say to me, “I don't know how you do it. It takes a special kind of person to work with people like that.” And on the one hand I could recognize the complement as appreciation for the work I was doing. Thanks. Yet on the other hand, I would just rebel at the phrase “people like that.”

My rebellion stemmed from the belief that what my friend Ron struggled with more than speech, more than mental capacity, more than awkward social skills, was social “otherness.” His biggest struggle was being perceived as a “person like that.”

The lawyer asks “what must I do to inherit eternal life.” Love God with your whole self, heart, soul, strength- the whole person. Love your neighbor as yourself. “Ah, but who is my neighbor.”

Oh that was clever. Jesus says, love with all you've got, and pour that love out for your neighbor. The lawyer wants to have a philosophical debate about how to define neighbor. The lawyer takes a practical, concrete requirement and gets it all tied up in the red tape of theoretical quandary. Isn't it amazing how we can avoid being human with each other by turning love into a theoretical quandary. We turn the neighbor into someone different, someone other, and then theorize about their worthiness for our love.

Well, Jesus doesn't let the lawyer or us get away with that. “Who is my neighbor? No, that is not the question. The real question is, how are you a neighbor?” Don't talk about them. Talk about yourself. Who are you to others; what parts of your heart and soul and strength have you closed off to others? Who are you unwilling to be neighbor to? Jesus turns the tables on prejudice and alienation. The Samaritan is your brother or sister. If we are to love with all our heart and soul and strength, there are no “thems.” That is our task, When someone who was once “them” becomes your sister or brother, then we are more truly and deeply human. Then we are following in the Jesus way. Then we have experienced fullness of life.

Judith Brian tells of a moment when she became more fully human. "My son," she writes, "is a jazz musician. My husband and I went to hear his band one night, at a club in Roxbury. It was a warm, inter-racial, friendly spot. At the table next to ours a big friendly African-American man attended to a tiny twisted human being on a wheeled cart. A paralyzed man with a puppet's body and large misshapen head lay on the cart sipping his beer through a straw and watching the musicians attentively. He seemed alert but only his eyes moved so it was hard to tell how much he really took in. His friend captured our attention. He seemed alive to every nuance of this poor deformed man. He leaned close to hear him speak in that noisy club and his manner proclaimed love. I thought about how wonderful this scene was, The club that embraced this broken person. I felt part of that embrace. I too was reaching out in some way with a friendly smile. "I accept you," I was saying.

The room was smoky and my contact lenses gave me trouble. I popped them out, slobbered them in my water glass, and put them back in. After a few minutes the tall man came over to our table and gave me a bottle of eye drops.

"Here. You need this."

"Oh, thanks," I gushed. "You noticed."

"No, my friend did, he said, pointing to the man on the cart. On that crooked face was a big grin.

He took pity on me, showed mercy to me.

For the past few weeks we have been taking a close look at our mission as a community of faith, "Embracing our community with the love of Christ." We have explored how very important it is to be clear about our mission, our holy purpose, the thing we are here for. We have looked at the active word in our mission, embrace, and how very worthy and risky it is to put that action at the centre of our purpose- an action that can take on so many different forms, and calls for a radical openness and a radical welcome from us. And today the question is, who is our community we are called to embrace?

And there is a real danger in this question. As soon as we ask, "who is the community that is to be the recipient of our embrace," we have created an us and a them. However unintentionally, even from a motive of compassion, we create an "otherness," a category of people who are not us. It is really hard to avoid, but nobody wants to be "them." Nobody wants to be a recipient of our benevolence. Judith Brian was jostled out of what she called her "pharisaical fog." "I accept you! What presumption! I thought I was whole and he was not. I thought I was the giver and he was the alien, the last person in the world who could help me. But the tables were turned. That twisted man in the jazz club became my neighbor; moved me from being in control- claiming the power of giver, to a position of humility."

"Who is our neighbor?" Who is our community referring to in our mission? Who is the person or group we are called to embrace? That is an impossible and a dangerous question, one that will lead us to create an artificial us and them. Jesus turns the tables on this very question and asks, "how are you being a neighbor to the community around you? With the parable Jesus moves us from seeing others as them to seeing others as kin. We are no longer the one who is dispensing mercy, but one who is part of a community of mercy given and received, fellow travelers on the dangerous Jericho road.

The parable of the Good Samaritan reminds us of the universal nature of God's grace and mercy. It tells us to recognize the work of God wherever it is happening, sometimes in places we are most afraid to look. "Go and do as he did," Jesus tells the lawyer. Learn to embrace from whomever teaches it. Value it wherever it may be found. God is there, working a mystery of grace and mercy, binding our wounds, beginning our healing.

Friends, who is our community? The call really is to be a neighbor. And where do we start with that? Well, find someone who is your equivalent to a Samaritan, someone whose story you do not know, who is one of "them" to you. She may be a teen-ager, an immigrant, a fundamentalist, an NDP'er, a Conservative; he may be gay or straight, sitting in a protest, doing something you just don't understand. Whoever it is, find that person, and start by going out for "fothy." Amen.