

“The One Who Showed Him Mercy”

July 13, 2025

Rev. Ursula E. Schreffler

Pentecost 5

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ! Amen. Today’s gospel reading is one of the most well-known stories of the New Testament, the parable of the Good Samaritan. It’s one of those stories that we have heard so often, and invoke in daily life, that it seems we must have it all figured out, right? The obvious question this story asks is, “Who is my neighbor?” Another question the parable challenges us with is, “What does God expect of us?” And if we can figure out the first two answers, we might ask ourselves this question, “Why does all of this matter?” Well, what do you think?

I remember the first time I truly saw a homeless person. I grew up in suburbia, at the end of a safe cul-de-sac, and I was very naïve about life when I was in high school. One of our teachers was driving us to see a play in downtown Pittsburgh. We passed through a rough area of the city and we saw a man who had passed out on the sidewalk. People had to walk around his body in order to pass by.

I remember the gut feeling I had and I was saddened that, in broad daylight, no one was coming to the aid of this poor man. I asked my teacher what was going on and why no one was helping. He didn’t have an answer, and I felt very confused. Wisdom and age have taught me that the people walking by probably felt they could not help the man, so they did not even bother. They might have been afraid of him. And worse still, they might not have cared about the man. People might have felt that he was responsible for his own actions, and didn’t deserve any help.

I also know that some people’s needs can be overwhelming. I would still feel helpless if I saw a man passed out on the sidewalk today. The best I could do would be to talk to the man and hopefully find services that could help him. As a fellow human being, this man certainly counts as my neighbor. I do believe we have an obligation to help him because I am a Christian. Because God first helped us, we must help others. But that does not make the situation any less uncomfortable. Meeting another person at his most vulnerable can cause us to feel vulnerable. And sometimes it causes us to back away.

But here’s the thing; the call to help others is the core of the Christian ethic. Jesus makes it very clear in the parable of the Good Samaritan that God expects us to show mercy to those who are in need. I do believe it this call is also built into our core as humans. Every religion has at its core and understanding of human suffering and a call to alleviate suffering. In Islam, performing acts of compassion is one of the five pillars of faith. Any Jewish Rabbi will tell you that God shares in human suffering and therefore we are all obliged to help alleviate suffering. Buddhism sees suffering as a basic truth of human existence and it calls all of humanity to alleviate that suffering. Hinduism emphasizes humanity’s responsibility for suffering and uses the concept of Karma to “set things right.” We are not alone in our belief that “a higher power” convicts us of our complicity in human suffering. The real question then becomes, “What are we going to do about it?”

So here’s where I see the good news. It all comes back to the same adage that has been at the core of my preaching lately: we love because God first loved us; we serve because God first

served us; we help because God first helped us; we show mercy because God first showed us mercy. God doesn't need our good works, but our neighbor sure does. And God promises to be with us as we minister to one another.

The first words that we speak together in worship are communal in nature and they speak for all of humanity: "we confess that we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves." This is a core acknowledgement, rooted in our Lutheran understanding of faith, that we are human and we require God's mercy and grace to survive in this world. We need to be saved and we cannot do it on our own. So we call out to God, and ask for God's mercy. In the same manner, our calling is to help our brothers and sisters in need who call out for help. Because if we deny their suffering, we deny their humanity. And if that happens, then God's good work is in vain. When we call out to God and ask for God's mercy, like we do in the Kyrie, we are trusting that God hears our cries and will help us.

It is true that we cannot solve everyone's problems on our own. But we can understand and acknowledge that others suffer. We can educate ourselves about other people's problems and their dilemmas. We can work in our community and contribute help where needed. That's why when disaster strikes, we show up. We can serve meals to firefighters and rescue workers, just like this congregation did for several weeks following the floods of 2011. When something in our human core acknowledges that others are suffering, this stirs in us a desire to help. And I thank you for all of those times that YOU felt the urge to help and responded in kind.

The parable of the Good Samaritan stands the test of time because it reflects a universal human truth. Or several truths, if you will. We are vulnerable creatures and life is precious. There is pain and suffering all around. If we can help someone on the long road from here to there, it benefits everyone. Life is hard and no one can make the journey alone. But our gift from God is this: we don't have to make it alone! God is with us every step of the way, and we are all in this together. We are all children of God and we all deserve God's mercy and love. To that eternal truth, let us all say, "Thanks be to God." **Amen.**