

Pentecost 8 C
Text: Luke 10:25-37

July 10, 2016

The Compassion Response

Three weeks ago, we held a prayer vigil under the oak tree to remember by name 49 precious children of God who were gunned down in a crowded LGBT bar in Orlando, the worst mass murder in our nation's history. We prayed for the families, for all whose lives will be forever scarred. We prayed for an end to the killing, to acts of senseless violence. We prayed for peace.

Today we have more precious children of God to remember:

Two young black men, Alton Sterling in Louisiana and Philando Castile in Minnesota, shot and killed by police making split-second decisions to use deadly force.

Five police officers: Brent Thompson, Patrick Zamarripa, Michael Krol, Michael Smith and Lorne Ahrens, gunned down in Dallas by another young black man, Micah Johnson, in an apparent act of reprisal.

A long time ago, a man who made his living studying and interpreting the Law of Moses came to Jesus with a question. "What must I *do* to inherit eternal life?" He asked not from a position of admitted ignorance, but as a scholar who already knew the answer but wanted to see if Jesus knew it, too. The moment the man opened his mouth, Jesus knew where he was coming from, so he said, in effect, "You're the expert, you tell me."

So the scholar gave his well-rehearsed response, taken straight from the Law of Moses: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."

After commending him on his answer, Jesus added: "Do this, and you will live." The bible expert was great at having all the right answers, at telling other people how they should live their lives. But Jesus was telling him that *knowing* the answer wasn't enough. You've got to *live* it, all the way. The way to life is the way of love: a passionate, all-consuming love for God and others. It's not giving your 10% to God each week, or 50%, or 90% or even 99.9%, but 100%, gladly and freely, all for love, holding nothing back for yourself.

When we are loving like that, totally focused on God and our neighbor, we discover the joy and freedom of life set free from narrow self-interest, life as it was meant to be. That's when we realize that eternal life is not an external reward we get in return for living a life of self-giving love; the life of love *is* the reward; it *is* eternal life, here and now *and* forever, a life that death cannot touch. Once we've tasted that life, we never want to live any other way, because we know that this is what we were made for.

That being true, it should come as no surprise to learn that the most amazing piece of divine engineering – the human body – has been designed, hardwired, for compassion. In his book *Social Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman reports that our brains are amazingly tuned-in to those around us. Specialized brain cells and structures respond instantly to the feelings of others, prompting us, in the words of Scripture, to laugh with those who laugh and to weep with those who weep, and to feel fearful ourselves when we sense fear in others. Not only are we hardwired to connect emotionally with others, but the more deeply we connect, the more we are compelled to take action on behalf of others, even at great cost to ourselves, as did the Samaritan in Jesus' parable.

But in order for that emotional connection to happen, we must first be aware of the other person's distress and come close enough to that person to enable the compassion response to kick in. When we are engrossed in our own problems, our own pain, our own world, we automatically filter out the emotional signals of those around us. The two men who walked by the injured man in Jesus' parable

of the Good Samaritan were not evil men. Although they saw the man in the ditch, and perhaps even felt sorry for him, they were not able to connect emotionally because they were too self-absorbed. Maybe they were too busy, too focused on where they were going or where they had just been. Maybe they were too fearful of what might happen to them on such a dangerous stretch of road to allow themselves to slow down even for a moment. Either way, they had their “blindness” on. Because they passed by “on the other side,” they never got close enough for their compassion instinct to overcome their distance.

Notice that the very first thing the Samaritan did was what the other men did not do. Jesus said, “a Samaritan while traveling *came near* him.” That was what made the difference. Once he was near the man in the ditch, the Samaritan immediately felt for the man and felt compelled to take action. And so he did.

Note how Jesus phrases the question he asks at the end of his story. Jesus takes the religious expert’s question, “Who is my neighbor?” and turns it inside out. “To whom will I become a neighbor, by drawing near to that person in love?” After all, the word “neighbor” in English and in the language of the Bible means “one who is near.”

That’s what love is. Love is all about *coming near* to others, focusing our attention on others, allowing ourselves to feel for others and then doing whatever love compels us to do for them. And that means overcoming the deeply entrenched racial and religious prejudices that keep us from coming near enough to see others as people like ourselves, like those that kept Jews and Samaritans apart in Jesus’ day. It also means overcoming all the busyness and distractions and the inner pain that keep us so focused on ourselves that we lose the ability to truly focus on those around us.

And that is exactly what God has done for us. In the man Jesus, God has come near to us. God has focused his attention on us and allowed himself to feel for us in a direct, physical way that only another human being can. Through Jesus, God has taken action on our behalf. He has made our suffering his suffering, our death his death, so that his life of perfect, self-giving love might become our life.

I believe God will renew and revitalize church, our community and our world by drawing us out of ourselves and closer to God, closer to each other, and closer to our neighbor in need. We need to let God tear down the social barriers that divide us, heal the inner hurts and calm the inner fears that keep us focused on ourselves and our problems, so that we can be set free to be what God made us to be.