

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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Our Director of Campus and Youth Ministry, Matt Phillips, mentioned to me that he'd like to research a new curriculum for the Sunday School to begin next Fall. He said that our current curriculum is on a two-year cycle, and the students will have gone through the program twice at the end of this year. Apparently, hearing the exact same stories in the exact same way for a third cycle would be pretty boring for some of the older kids. He said this within the hearing of Kathy Katter, our Senior Warden, who quipped, "imagine hearing the same stories for fifty years in church!"

Right after she made the joke, I looked to this week's Gospel story and, of course, it was probably the most well-known parable in the new testament. The Good Samaritan is so deep in our cultural DNA by now that it's a common and even secular phrase unmoored from its religious roots. Lots of folks can tell you what a Good Samaritan is without knowing that the source material is in the Bible, is in the Gospel of Luke, and is a parable told by Jesus.

You know the story. A man was beset by robbers and left wounded on the side of the road. Two holy people pass by and do not assist. Then a foreigner, a Samaritan, comes to his aid, tends his wounds, and sets him up in an inn to recuperate.

There are several strong, faithful readings of this story. In one, the follower of Jesus is to see herself in the role of the Samaritan. To follow Jesus is to give self-sacrificial aid to the stranger in need. Another reading is that we are the man in the ditch. The weight of our sins — known and unknown — render us incapacitated, and we need Jesus, the Good Samaritan, to come to our aid and pull us out of our distress. There's a more modern reading that pays attention to grace in the story coming from an unusual place — from a Samaritan — someone who does not share the religion, the language, or the ethnic makeup of the kingdom of Israel. The salvation in the story is not from the Temple but rather from the outside. How many Samaritans is God working through right now that we ignore because of their skin color, immigration status, accents, or religion, this reading asks of us?

If you've been coming to church a long time, you've probably heard a sermon riff on any one of these readings. And that's a good thing. You can go a long way in your walk with Jesus if you pay attention to those in need, admit your own limitations, and keep an eye for God at work in the unlikely stranger.

I'll admit, though, my first thought when I noticed that the Good Samaritan was up this Sunday was, "oh yeah, I know that one." It didn't produce any fire in my belly or even particular interest. My second thought was, "I bet I have a serviceable sermon on this lying around somewhere already written." I think, like our Sunday School kids, I was in need of a new curriculum. Or I just needed some new eyes to see the text.

So, I read it again, and I found myself pretty curious about a character that doesn't get much air time. I noticed the innkeeper. The Samaritan leaves the wounded man at an inn with money and instructions for the innkeeper, who kind of takes over for a bit.

I got to thinking about all the things that had to be in place for the story to end up at the inn. That innkeeper had to have gotten up early, kept the rooms ready, served her other guests, make sure there was food for everyone, and maintained her physical plant. If the innkeeper had not done all of that, the story would have ended very differently. The innkeeper provided the infrastructure for the story to unfold. She provided a place where the wounded man could recuperate.

I know that we, as followers of Jesus, are supposed to see ourselves sometimes like the man in the ditch. And, when we're following the angels of our better nature, as the Samaritan. In fact, the last five weeks of sermons from this pulpit have all admonished the congregation to go out into the world in some way, shape, or form.

But what if, today, we talk about the followers of Jesus who stay put. The followers of Jesus who maintain monasteries, chapels, hostels, or shelters. What about those people who work hard to make sure that they are always prepared for those who find themselves in need right on our thresholds.

How many of you have ever come through the doors of St. Mark's in need of solace, healing, or grace? What was it about this actual place that provided it? We, the church, have an opportunity to be like that innkeeper — prepared for the day that the wounded appear at our door. And they certainly do. Abuse. Divorce. Mental Illness. Job Loss. General Anxiety. Political Anxiety. People come into this space wounded and knocked around. And we, the innkeepers, have a duty and obligation to have it ready against the time of their need. We are the inn. We are the hospital. We are the way station for spiritual travelers who need a place to lay down their burdens.

We don't maintain our beautiful spaces simply for the love of it. We maintain them for those who haven't even walked in our doors yet. You'll hear a lot over these next months about how our spaces should be used for the good of the world, how we should raise and spend our resources on their maintenance. And when you do, I want you to remember the innkeeper, without whom the Good Samaritan's act of grace would be incomplete. You're the keepers of this place and the stewards of St. Mark's. May it be open to the needs of the world for all the generations to come. Amen.