

Sermon for 7-14-19
Scriptures: Deuteronomy 30:9-14 and Luke 10:25-37
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"The Lord your God will make you abundantly prosperous in all your undertakings... [T]he Lord will take delight in prospering you... when you obey the Lord your God by observing his commandments and decrees..."ⁱ

That's Moses speaking to the people of Israel in Deuteronomy chapter 30, from our first reading this morning. But it sounds a bit like something we might hear from Joel Osteen, or any other preacher of the American 'Prosperity Gospel.'

The Lord will bless you; he's gonna fill you up; he'll solve all your problems and cure all your ills and fill up your bank account if you just follow him! God will take delight in prospering you! Overflowing blessings are waiting in your future, and all you've gotta do is follow God's word and trust in him. Wealth and success and security -- everything you've ever dreamed of and more -- is within your reach. Obey the Lord, and trust in him, and he will make you prosper in all things!

Sounds exciting, doesn't it? Wouldn't it be great if God was like a big cosmic ATM in the sky, and all we had to do was go to church and follow the commandments and pray for blessings, and God would give us whatever we asked for?

But of course, it's nonsense. We know from experience that this is not how God, or the world, works. Wealth and success and prosperity don't automatically come to those who worship and serve and obey God. All we have to do is look around to see that sometimes, yes, the faithful do prosper, but sometimes the selfish and faithless are the ones who prosper (at least by our worldly standards).

This is just reality, right?

And yet... When we look in the Scriptures, when we read words like those from Moses this morning, and when we encounter God in our worship and our singing and our prayers... we can't deny the amazing goodness, the abundant beneficence of God. God is a never-ending fount of blessing and love and mercy and peace. Our Creator molds each one of us, guides each one of us, holds and loves and blesses each one of us. We are God's precious children, eternally beloved and infinitely valued.

We know this, in the deepest fibers of our being. It's imprinted in our DNA; it's written in the stars. As Moses says, "It is in your mouth and in your heart..."ⁱⁱⁱ Our God loves us and blesses us.

But... there's a big hole here, right? There's a gap, somewhere, between God's abundant love and blessing and the reality we see around us -- the pain, the suffering, the isolation, the hatred. So many of God's children around the world, across this nation, and even here in this room, aren't living lives of prosperity and abundance and blessings.

So why the gap? And how can we fix it?

It's a huge dilemma of theology and faith, and we can't solve it in one sermon or one Sunday or even one lifetime. But I think it's here -- right in the midst of the unsolvable problem, the unanswerable question -- where Jesus comes in. Jesus fills the gap for us. Jesus shows us the way across the gap; he shepherds us through the valley; he directs us on the path of hope and healing.

But of course, he doesn't do this with step-by-step instructions, or a tidy roadmap. He does it with a story.

"A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers..."ⁱⁱⁱⁱ
We know where this is going. We know the parable. Beaten and left for dead on the side of the road, and the two religious types, the 'good and godly' men, ignore him. The one who stops and helps, the one who is moved with compassion and cares for the injured man, is the Good Samaritan. The ones who *should* have cared, who *should* have been neighbors to the injured man, did nothing. And the one who has no logical reason to help, the one who's looked down on, who's rejected and villified -- he's the one who saves a life.

"Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"^{iv}

"The one who showed him mercy."^v

And Jesus replied: *"Go and do likewise."^{vi}*

Go and do likewise... if we think all Jesus is saying is, "Go help everyone who needs help," we're missing the point. There's more going on here. {That's always true with Jesus and his parables -- there's always more under the surface!}

Why does Jesus tell the Parable of the Good Samaritan and not the Parable of the Good Hebrew or the Good Israelite? What does it mean that the one who shows mercy, who saves the day, who neighbors the injured man, is a Samaritan? Samaritans were feared and disdained -- ritually unclean, socially outcast, and heretical (from the Jewish point of view, because they did not worship the God of Israel).^{vii} The Samaritan should not be the hero of the story.

We have every reason to believe that the man in the ditch, along with the priest and the Levite, would have feared the Samaritan, and would have shunned any interaction with him if the tables were turned. Not because of any unique selfishness or hardness of heart, but simply because that's the way things were back then. Jews and Samaritans did not interact. They did not associate with one another.

Jesus is so amazing. Jesus is so great, so profound, so honest and holy and wise... here's what he does, in this parable: he makes the unclean clean. He makes the inhuman human. He exalts the lowly, he affirms the downtrodden, he redeems the dignity of the hated.

The Samaritan man isn't simply a helper or an example of kindness. He's the proof of human dignity and goodness. Righteousness and valor and worth do not end or begin with the barriers we humans construct to divide ourselves. The Samaritan, who is lesser than, unwanted, cast out... he's the only one in the story who demonstrates humanity. And not just humanity, but maybe divinity too.

"... [W]hen he saw [the injured man], he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.'"^{viii}

He went to him... he saw pain and suffering, and moved toward it -- just as God moved toward the world's brokenness in the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

He poured oil and wine on his wounds... he practiced extravagant healing and mercy -- just like Jesus in his earthly life, just like the God who anoints our heads with oil in the presence of our enemies and makes our cups overflow (Psalm 23:5).

He paid for the injured man's care from his own assets, at a high cost, without any hesitation -- just like God, who gave us the gift of Christ; and just like Christ, who gave us his everything, his all, his very life, to redeem us, to restore us to wholeness and righteousness.

The Samaritan man acts like God, heals like God, gives like God and loves like God!

And there's our answer. There's how we fill in the gap; there's how we move forward toward the beautiful horizon of God's blessings and prosperity for all people. We refuse to dehumanize. We resist division. We move closer to our fellow human beings even when all the powers of this world would keep us apart.

And we act like God, and give like God, and love like God. That is how we become the people we were meant to be; that is how we live into true blessings and true prosperity for all God's creation.

Let us end with these words of Saint Teresa of Avila -- maybe you know them:

*Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are his body....
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.^{ix} Amen.*

ⁱ Deuteronomy 30:9-10

ⁱⁱ Deuteronomy 30:14

ⁱⁱⁱ Luke 10:30

^{iv} Luke 10:36

^v Luke 10:37

^{vi} Luke 10:37

^{vii} from the HarperCollins Bible Commentary (1988), p. 942.

^{viii} Luke 10:33-35

^{ix} https://www.journeywithjesus.net/PoemsAndPrayers/Teresa_Of_Avila_Christ_Has_No_Body.shtml