

The 8<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 10 Deuteronomy 30:9-14 Colossians 1:1-14  
Luke 10:25-37 St. Augustine's in -the-Woods, Freeland WA Nigel Taber-Hamilton

Wadi Qelt is a gash in the earth, a winding 25 mile-long hundreds of feet deep gorge with steep, v-shaped sides that cuts through the limestone/sandstone high desert west of Jerusalem, to Jericho. About half-way up its northern side a winding, narrow, sometimes precarious path clings, no more than a yard wide, sometimes less. This path snakes up and down along the gorge's whole length. Jerusalem sits nearly twenty-five hundred feet *above* sea level, while Jericho is nearly nine hundred feet *below* sea level, so there's a nearly thirty-five hundred feet change between the two cities in that distance – about 175 feet a mile – pretty dramatic! Wadi Qelt contains a stream which keeps the gorge's floor verdant, but the path is dry and dusty. On the hillside above the path are hundreds of caves, capable of holding anywhere from a few to dozens of people.

No matter the time of year, it gets hot in Wadi Qelt – travel it during the day (especially in the middle of the day) and the sun is always overhead – and there's no shade.

This is the path – not a road, but a path – on which “[a] man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho” in today's gospel. Wadi Qelt was the main way from the Galilee region, the Jordan river valley, and Jericho to Jerusalem – in fact the only way for those who called the Temple in Jerusalem their own. But in addition to the dangers of the heat and sun there was another problem with the Wadi – the caves allowed bandits to hide and ambush unsuspecting travelers. This double-threat of heat and bandits led to two strategies – start your journey very early in the morning, and travel in groups.

This man is going down from Jerusalem – he's leaving. Given that, later, we hear that a Priest and a temple functionary are also leaving, I think it's likely that a temple festival has just ended, and all three – who are therefore clearly all Jewish – are rushing to get ahead of the crowd – like the folk who leave Safeco field before the final 'out.' Or perhaps each had pressing business in Jericho. Whatever the reason, it's obvious that, for each, their journey was important, or they'd never have done it alone.

Almost inevitably, the first is ambushed and robbed. Bandits didn't leave any eyewitnesses, so it's pretty safe to assume that “half-dead” is an understatement. He was left for dead.

The other two travelers come by, each alone. Seeing a seemingly dead body in that context must have filled them both with fear: the body meant that there were evil men around, waiting to ambush them. So while Jesus' listeners would have been disappointed that these two representatives of their faith failed to honor Torah's call for a compassionate response, they might have understood the reason. Fear can make otherwise compassionate people do cruel things.

Then a Samaritan arrives. Wonderful guy! Despite the fear and danger, he's the one to be compassionate! Google “Samaritan” today and you will, almost uniformly, find that name used in the title of Christian organizations dedicated to compassionate ministry, including international

relief organizations, Episcopal Hospitals, crisis hotlines, and so on. But here's our problem: the phrase "Good Samaritan" is ubiquitous for us that we lose the power of this story. As I said two weeks ago, Samaritans in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century considered themselves 'real' Jews, descendants of the Northern Israelite tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh. They had a rival temple on Mt. Gerizim, and a rival Torah. And they hated, and were hated by, the Judean Jews descended from the southern Kingdom – a classic "north vs. south" antipathy. So for Jesus' listeners, here comes the bogey man, the "hobgoblin" of middle-English, the quintessential representative of evil, the devil's right-hand 'fixer.' Jesus' listeners must have thought, "what's he going to do? Push the body off into the gorge so there can't be a proper burial?" How shocking, then, that it is this man above all others who turns out to have a heart of gold and not of lead; the epitome of loving one's neighbor as oneself, the living embodiment of Torah compassion. Who knew?!!!

This is a story about the nature and content of true compassion, and it is rich, deep, and compelling – especially so, given the events of the last week. For instance, we should pay attention to the fact that every person in this story is Jewish, as is the one who tells it and those who listen to it – this is one family. Any of us who have ever been a part of a family (and I suspect that's all of us!) know how easy it is for family squabbles can get out of hand. This is a story about the way that one family's dysfunction plays out. There's understanding about the challenges we face as human beings that can lead us to act in ways that are outside of our core values, disappointment when we see those we respect falling down in their responsibilities; assumptions about how we expect a particular family member will act; fear about what they'll do that could turn a bad situation even worse; and a 'world-turned-upside-down' shock when one of those family members – the black sheep, the one who might well get violent – does the exact opposite of what we were expecting.

I don't know about you, but when my assumptions are proved to be so totally out of whack as is the case here with the Samaritan Jew it gives me real pause. Those are the moments we remember; those are the moments that can change our lives.

Over the last week there have been a series of events that visibly challenge some of the assumptions that our culture makes. Some of those dedicated to "Serve and Protect" instead kill. Those who our dominant white culture has turned into bogeymen – young black men – turn out – at least in one case – to be a pillar of his community. And in a city raised up as a model of police-community relationship instead of an example of police vs. community warfare, police who were bravely seeking to "serve and protect" are ambushed and murdered. To quote psalm 11, "When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?" Here – in this week – is an overall opportunity that pulls us up short, so what are we going to do?

In the face of the deaths of so many black men at the hands of a few white police officers, the airwaves have been flooded with talk of the need for a conversation about race – and its about time. That racist violence has been around for a very long time, but it's only with the advent of cell-phone cameras and Facebook Live that we actually get to see it. As one news outlet said, "anger has been replaced by rage." In addition to issues of race, there are other causes that are addressed by today's parable. One – related to the shootings in Dallas – has to do with the mental health of the shooter. Reaganism, with its focus on trickle-down and the free-market economy,

eviscerated our mental health programs nation-wide. The truth is that nothing has trickled down. Mass shootings lay bare our failure to address mental health issues. Linked to that is the way we fail to help our vets re-integrate when they return from the battle field. The World War II vets had months, and in some cases, years, to make the transition before they returned home. And still we never helped them address PTSD and the other brutal legacies of their service. Now our vets have hours and days to transition – it's not enough. After all their sacrifices we're failing them. The suicide rate among returning vets is through the roof. We've trained them to kill, then put them back in an environment where it's almost easier to buy a gun than a pack of Sudafed. Combine lack of access to mental health services and a rampant gun culture, and it should come as no surprise that someone, somewhere will pick up a gun and use it as a problem-solver. This in no way diminishes the evil of the shooter's actions in Dallas, which were heinous, callous and heartless. But it calls to us to respond by addressing the combined fundamental needs of mental health services and the accessibility of guns. Both our Jewish forebears and Jesus and Paul offer us a vision of a life predicated on compassion for exactly those who, in the normal course of events in most cultures, would not have compassion extended to them. Who is the "other" for us? Who is the "other" for those police officers in Baton Rouge, and Minneapolis, and Dallas. How can we, out of our faith, help to heal the gaping wounds we see around us? By taking the Samaritan's example of compassion for a hated enemy and "go[ing] and do[ing] likewise.

A second issue is this: what are we teaching our children – our boys and our young men – such that violence in all its forms is an acceptable response to almost any situation? The history of mass shootings in this country contains no women as perpetrators. And between 2004 and 2009, of the some nine thousand people shot and killed by the police, only 200 were women. Violence between men is at epidemic proportions. Jesus and Paul both offer us a vision of community that turns away from violence and toward peace, turns away from patriarchy and toward egalitarianism, turns away from hierarchy and toward a radical equality where only our roles differ. How can we, out of our faith, encourage our children, and especially our boy children to embrace a perspective that says violence is never the answer? At the least by taking the Samaritan's example of compassion for a hated enemy and "go[ing] and do[ing] likewise. As the dominant culture it's our responsibility to act.

You know, citizenship has no color. We might be a dysfunctional family at the moment, but we *are* a family, not a rag-tag collection of individuals whose self-interest trumps all. The shootings in Dallas happened close by Dealey Plaza, where another gun victim died, a victim who once said, "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." Perhaps for us, more pointedly, that call from JFK should be paraphrased as "Ask not what your faith can do for you; ask what you can do for your faith; what can you do for your God; what can we do for each other?" In the face of the violence of this week – which is only the tip of the iceberg, after all – we are called to embrace that orientation toward of faith as Christians by taking the Samaritan's example of compassion for a hated enemy and "go[ing] and do[ing] likewise. May the hard work ahead of us all begin with this moment when we have been brought up short by the senseless violence; may it begin with us.