

FAITH AND COMPASSION IN ACTION

Luke 10:25-37

Antioch Baptist Church

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Social Justice Sunday

On the evening of June 6th our church will be joining with other congregations of Christians, Jews and Muslims to form a new organization that will be called Greater Cleveland Congregations. The objective of this group is to work together on major issues of justice which none of our congregations could fully address, much less resolve alone. The theme for the meeting next Monday is the same as the sermon being preached here today; Faith and Compassion in Action.

Each of those words carries a significant meaning. Faith points to the biblical and theological foundation that must undergird any actions taken by people who work in the name of God. Compassion points to the fact that we are attempting to respond to the needs of others, and not simply involve ourselves in something in which we are the likely beneficiaries. In action suggests that we do not want to talk about the problems in our city and our region; we actually want to do something about those problems, and to do that work together.

There are around 40 congregations that will be coming together for this first meeting next week. We have been challenged to have 100 members of this congregation present and ready to be assigned to one of five areas of interest ranging from quality education, to economic development, to affordable and accessible health care and much more. Today's sermon is intended to provide a biblical rationale not only for why Antioch as a congregation should be involved in this effort, but more precisely to make the case for why each one of us should feel compelled to be involved ourselves; beginning with our presence on June 6th.

In making that case, I point us to the classic parable of the Good Samaritan told by Jesus and recorded in Luke 10: 25-37. Every aspect of that story has relevance for the times in which we are living right now. Like all parables it is important not only to study the story that Jesus tells, but to first pay attention to the question or the comment that caused Jesus to tell the parable in the first place. Parables are not simply stories that Jesus tells from time to time; they are intricately detailed responses made by Jesus in reaction to a comment or a question that has been directed to him. In the case of this parable the question was "who is my neighbor."

For Jesus and for all people that are informed by biblical faith our neighbor is not simply the person that lives near us. The neighbor is not just the person or the family next door, across the street or around the corner from where we live. Instead, the neighbor is that person for whom we accept some measure of responsibility. The neighbor is not just the person to whom we occasionally speak when we go out to pick up the newspaper each morning. The neighbor, as Jesus understands that term is the person whose hurts and pains and problems have the ability to stir us into action on their behalf.

To have a sense of neighborliness is to confess that the things that are important to us are not limited to what goes on inside the walls of our home, or in our case inside the walls of our church. As I mentioned to you some months ago, the challenge for every church is to guard against begin what James Harris calls "an introverted church" whose interests and concerns are

limited to the needs of its own membership. What we need instead is what is often referred to as “an externally focused church” in which the people and problems that reside outside the doors of our church are things that can move us into action.

Let us see how that principle of being a neighbor is played out in this familiar parable. Jesus says that there was a man who was accosted along the highway, beaten, robbed, stripped and left for dead. The man was not named, because like so many victims of crime today they are people that most of us do not know, and to whom most of us do not even give a second thought. We may grumble about an increase in violent crime, but we do not choose to do anything about it. We may regret the fact that the first five stories on the evening news every night are about one criminal act after another. We complain about the world we are living in, but we never take a step to change that world. After all, it is just one more man left lying half-dead in the street.

The story takes on more power when Jesus begins to describe the reaction of those who passed that man while he was lying in the road. The first person to pass by was a priest, a religious person that worked in the temple in Jerusalem. No doubt he was one of the persons that helped in offering animal sacrifices or leading in the various religious rituals of Judaism. You might think that such a man would quickly come to the aid of someone lying in a pool of blood on the side of the road. Instead, he passed by and never did a thing.

The second person to come along was a Levite; he too was a priest in Jerusalem, but in his case he came from a family tradition within the tribe of Levi, the third son of Jacob that had served as priests dating back over one thousand years. You could say that one of them was a priest by vocational choice, and the other one was destined to be a priest from birth. Both of them were schooled in Jewish law. They knew about the prophetic voices such as Amos and Jeremiah and their call for justice and their concern for the poor and the oppressed. These two religious men knew what needed to be done, and they knew it was within their power to come to the aid of that man lying in the road. Yet, all they did was pass by on the other side.

Of course they had what seemed to them to be a perfectly good reason for not getting involved. There was a law in the book of Leviticus that dealt with the kind of ritual purity a priest had to maintain if he was to be qualified to serve in any official capacity in the temple. Part of that law stated that they were forbidden from coming into contact with any corpse or dead body; human or animal. For them to do so would render them ritually unclean, and that would prevent them from fulfilling their duties.

Perhaps the priest and the Levite thought the man was already dead. If so, to touch him would render them ritually unclean. They probably told themselves that it would be better if they did not touch him. After all, he is dead so what could they do about it anyway. The better thing for them to do was to keep traveling on their way to perform the appropriate religious rituals for the people who were awaiting their arrival later that day. In other words, they were so focused on the rituals of their religion that they were quite willing to overlook the call for righteousness and justice and mercy.

This is where so many people in so many churches can be found; busy with being religious but unwilling to do the works of righteousness. They will attend church but will not volunteer at the hunger ministry. They will sit in the pew every Sunday but they will not go along on a trip to a local prison. They will not miss one Sunday of worship but they will not commit one hour to some work that serves to meet the needs of those whose problems are serious and urgent and desperate. There are people, preachers and laity alike that could step into this parable by Jesus and do exactly what this priest and this Levite did; see a person in desperate need but pass by on the other side of the road.

The story then shifts to the person that did stop and come to the aid of the man who had been left for dead. Jesus says that a Samaritan saw the man and had compassion on him. The other two men also saw the man, but what they lacked was compassion. How do you know when you have compassion for another person? You have compassion when you cannot ignore what you see happening in their lives. You have compassion when you can put your little problems aside for a while so you can help address the larger problems in our community and in our country. You have compassion when you are willing and able to give of your time and your money to help someone whose needs are so much greater than yours or mine. You have compassion when you act out the words of Romans 12:15 that say “weep with those who weep.”

That Samaritan had compassion on that beaten and dying man. However, the story is not only about the fact of what that Samaritan did, it was also about who that Samaritan was. From the Jewish point of view in the first century AD a Samaritan was a despised and hated person from a despised and hated group. Jews felt about Samaritans like some people in this country feel about black and other minority groups; they hate and despise them not for what they do but because of who or what they are.

Samaritans were a group of people whose origins dated back 700 years when the ten tribes of Israel in the northern part of the country were conquered by the Assyrian Empire. The Assyrians deported most of the leading families and skilled workers out of the country and sent them into exile in various places throughout that empire that would include what we today call Syria and Jordan and Iraq. At the same time, the Assyrians imported into Israel other conquered nations within their empire that would inevitably result in intermarriage and the inter mingling of cultures and religions. According to the books of Ezra and Nehemiah that is exactly what happened when the Jews that were left behind in the northern part of the country intermarried with the foreigners that had been imported. All sense of their being the offspring of Abraham was lost since they were now a people of a multi-ethnic background.

To make matters worse, these Samaritans adopted religious practices that varied with those practiced by Jews in Jerusalem Samaritans believed that the holy mountain was Mt. Gerizim in the north and not Mount Zion in Jerusalem in the southern part of the country. Samaritans only affirmed the first five books of Moses; Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. They did not embrace the prophets, the Psalms or any of the writings of Solomon. From the Jewish point of view, Samaritans were ethnically impure and theologically inaccurate. Over a period of 700 hundred years that resulted in great hatred and scorn on both sides. That is why a Samaritan woman was surprised when Jesus spoke to her in public and reminded him that “Jews have no dealings with Samaritans” (John 4:9).

Jesus never called the man a “good Samaritan.” That phrase arose from the circumstances of those who heard the story. For the average Jew the phrase “good Samaritan” would have been what we call an oxymoron, or two words that can never be used together. Yet, it was that Good Samaritan that does what those two religious men would not do; have compassion on a fellow human being. He did several things as a sign of compassion:

1. He went to the man. He did not pass by; he got involved.
2. He bandaged his wounds; he addressed the problem at hand.
3. He poured oil and wine on the wounds to serve as an antiseptic
4. He put the beaten man on his donkey and carried him to a nearby inn
5. He personally took care of the man when they reached the inn

6. He paid in advance to have the innkeeper continue to care for the man when he had to leave to finish his journey
7. He promised to pay whatever more was due to the innkeeper for providing that care when he passed back that way.

When the story had been told, Jesus turned back to those who had asked the question about “who is my neighbor.” He asked them which person in the story had been the true neighbor to the man in need. The answer came back loud and clear; “The one who had compassion, the one who showed mercy.” Hearing that answer, Jesus turned again to the crowd standing nearby and said “Go and do likewise.”

This is the challenge for every church and for every Christian; we are called upon to go and do likewise. Persons from the other faith traditions will, no doubt offer a defense for their involvement in matters of social justice based upon the teachings and examples found within their holy writings. However, this is the basis for our involvement in Faith and Compassion in Action. Our identity as Christians is not defined by our personal salvation or our personal relationship with God. The Christian life is not and never was a matter of reading the Bible to ourselves and saying prayers for ourselves in an attempt to build up credits with God that will assist us in gaining entrance into heaven. Anybody who limits their Christian witness to matters of personal salvation, and who does not engage in the business of Faith and Compassion in action will more likely find themselves ending up in hell and not heaven!

In case you think I am exaggerating, I remind you of the Great Judgment scene in Matthew 25: 31-44 where the criteria for admission into God’s kingdom are clearly set forth. That story envisions the day when all people will stand before God in judgment. They will be separated not according to their denominational affiliation or the length of their membership in their particular religious tradition. They will be separated according to whether or not they showed compassion toward others during their lifetime. Many of you know these words already, but let me state them again for those who may not know. Jesus says:

*I was hungry and you fed me,
I was thirsty and you gave me drink,
I was naked and you clothed me,
I was a stranger and you took me in,
I was sick and you visited me,
I was in prison and you came to see about me.*

Then he says that whoever does these things for “the least of these” or the persons with the least power, the least influence and the least in terms of resources has, in fact done those very things for Jesus as well.

The same categories are listed again, only this time in the negative; you did not feed me, clothe me, give me a drink, care for me, visit me, look out for me. The people who are facing judgment tell Jesus that they certainly would have done all those things if only they had known that the needy person had been Jesus. Lord, if we had only known it was you we would have done everything you requested. Jesus answered by saying that it was him, because what we do not do for those who face the greatest need equates to not doing it for Jesus as well. Those who did show compassion are sent off to eternal peace and joy, but those who showed no compassion are sent off to eternal hell and suffering.

This morning there are hundreds of members of this church present in this sanctuary. This leads me to ask you this question and to leave it with you as you and I prepare to leave and go about our activities throughout this day and the coming days. What good do you think it does us to come to church on Sunday if we are not willing to come to the aid of our neighbors during the week? What do we think God will say to us and about us when we stand before God in the judgment if all we have to show for our Christian service is personal, spiritual formation that is unmatched by any sense of compassion for “the least of these?”

Our faith in God should result in our compassion toward our fellow human beings that we gladly put into action in the name of Jesus. It is not too late to sign up. It is not too late to get involved. I never did believe Harold Camping when he said that the rapture would occur on May 21, 2011. Now he says that it will really occur on October 21, 2011. I am not putting much stock in that prediction either. Frankly, I believe it is wrong and wasteful to spend time waiting on Jesus to return that we could be using to work in the kingdom that Jesus came to establish. Jesus never told us to try and guess when he might return.

In Acts 1:6 he rebukes his disciples over that very question, and then tells them to spend their time being his witness in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth. I know this much; if Jesus had come back on May 21, 2011 a great many people would have been taking the “A Train” not to Harlem but to hell. I know this as well, the day will come when each one of us will stand before God; either because he comes here or we go there in death. What will he say about us on that day? Will he say that we saw the problems of the world but passed by to avoid getting ourselves involved? Or will he say that we saw the problem, got involved, invested our time and our money and our concerns, and did all of that on behalf of “the least of these?”

If I were you I would sign up to be present on June 6th to learn how to put Faith and Compassion into Action. If you do not sign up because you are rushing off to have brunch you may actually be rushing into hell and judgment instead. Let me leave you with this Litany that was written for a group that was meeting in Santa Fe, New Mexico a few years ago. It says:

*I was hungry, and you formed a humanities club and discussed my hunger. Thank You.
I was imprisoned and you crept off quietly to your chapel in the cellar and prayed for my
release.*

I was naked and in your mind you debated the morality of my appearance.

I was sick and you knelt and thanked God for your health.

I was homeless and you preached to me of the spiritual shelter of the love of God.

I was lonely and you left me alone to pray for me. You seem so holy, so close to God.

But I'm still very hungry, and lonely and cold.

*So where have your prayers gone? What have they done? What does it profit a man to
page through his book of prayers when the rest of the world is crying for his
help?ⁱ*

ⁱ Earl Shelp and Ronald Sunderland, *The Pastor as Servant*, Pilgrim Press: New York, 1986, p. 63-64.