

In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Do you remember the old feltboards from Sunday School? The power-point of yesteryear, if you will? You know, those big or not-so-big boards covered in blue or purple felt? Felt, that things could stick to. We still have in our Sunday School closet at church

On these feltboards, Sunday School teachers could retell a story from the bible using colorful, visual aids. And they could retell the story and turn it into a simple lesson for you to take with you for the week. Jesus says, "Show mercy to your neighbor. The End." Simple, right?

We might imagine our Sunday School teacher taking a lawyer out of the box of felt people and placing him on the feltboard. "A lawyer came to talk to Jesus," our Sunday School teacher might begin. The lawyer knew lots of things, including what God's law says. When Jesus asked him questions, the lawyer knew the answers. Jesus didn't always answer questions with clear answers. Sometimes he told stories. This is what he did with this lawyer.

And then, our Sunday School teacher would clear the feltboard and set the scene for Jesus' story. "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho." Perhaps you've heard this one before. Soon our felt board would be filled with the robbers and the injured man,
a road and a animal,
some coins, the priest, the Levite, the innkeeper,
and of course, the Good Samaritan.

Scene change, and Jesus asks our lawyer another question, "Who was neighbor to the man who was robbed?" And the lawyer is correct once again in answering, "The one who showed him mercy."

"Go and do likewise," Jesus says.

Jesus says, "Show mercy to your neighbor. The End."
And the feltboard is cleared.

When have you shown mercy to a neighbor? To a stranger?

We might assume that everyone knows this story, that it has been written in our hearts and told from our mouths. Whether you've heard it for what feels like the millionth time or only once, we've all heard it together here this morning. And we might be tempted to simply conclude with the feltboard-bearing Sunday School teacher: Jesus says, "Show mercy to your neighbor. The End."

The Good Samaritan. The individual who shows compassion in this parable, the one who shows mercy, has no name but the title that he has been given. When we think of this description, different organizations or concepts or places might come to mind. What do you think of?

We might think of Good Samaritan Hospitals..

Or Good Samaritan accounts for pastors to use to help people in need.

The Samaritan's Purse, an international relief agency.

Or Good Samaritan laws that serve to protect people who assist others who are injured or ill.

For the good lawyer in our text this morning and for Luke's original audience, the term "Good Samaritan" would have presented a challenge. It would almost be an oxymoron. Samaritans and Jews hated each other. For a good Jewish teacher like Jesus, a parable with the hero Good Samaritan would challenge the tension that ran deep with racial and religious prejudice.

In college, I took a course called "Modern Middle Eastern History," and I was sorely disappointed when we had to trace back centuries before we could even begin to tackle the late twentieth century conflicts in the Middle East. The story Jesus tells addresses this old, and sadly still very new, conflict.

It's not the priest, called to serve God's people in the temple, who helps the injured man.

It's not the Levite, who would have assisted the priest in the temple.

It's the Samaritan who helps. The hated one. The unclean one. The different one.

When has someone surprised you with compassion? With mercy?

We might encounter this story not just as a moral lesson then, "to go and do good," but rather as a social commentary on how the most surprising or hated person can show the most mercy, the most love.

Or there's another reading we might adopt.

We're moving farther away from that simplicity of the feltboard now, aren't we?

New Testament Scholar Mark Allan Powell presents another reading on this text that comes out of his experience in Tanzania (where there are 2.5 million Lutherans by the way). Powell encountered a reading of this text where we look not to the Good Samaritan but to the injured man as one who knows how to accept care.

"The moral of the story," Powell was told, "is that people who are beaten, robbed, and left for dead cannot afford the luxury of prejudice."¹ In Tanzania, the country's Good Samaritan policy is quite different from our own Good Samaritan laws or codes of conduct. The Good Samaritan Policy in Tanzania allows for the reception of aid from other countries regardless of their political identity (capitalist or communist).

I think of this text as a challenge to both myself and to those among us who find it difficult sometimes to receive care. The people who minister with the Grace Care group at my church have told me stories about people who are quite willing to cook or deliver to those who are ill or recovering from illness but they are reluctant in accepting such care.

This parable of the Good Samaritan then becomes an encouragement to not only show mercy but to be open to the mercy shown by others.

¹ Mark Allan Powell. *What Do They Hear? Bridging the Gap Between Pulpit and Pew*. Page 35.

Have you ever entered a situation, a moment of ministry, where you think you are going to help someone else or share your gifts and talents with someone else? And in the end, you end up feeling like you've received so much more?

Our scriptures speak of mercy.

Our classmates preach about mercy.

In prayers, we plead for mercy.

When it comes to our learning contracts today, may our advisors have some mercy.

Like the lawyer coming with a question in our Lukan text or on the feltboard, we too come together to experience mercy and to encounter Jesus.

And so, we look to the cross where he died for the sins of the world.

And we look to the resurrection when he rose from the dead so that we might have new and everlasting life.

Jesus is the embodiment of all mercy, of all things merciful:

in the water and the Word,

in gifts received,

a table spread,

arms outstretched.

Off of the feltboard and into the world,

Into your life and mine,

Jesus embodies mercy.

It's so simple and at the same time so very complex:

Jesus is the one who gives us care unconditionally,

the one who works through us when we care for others.

To the glory of God.

