

#794 More Ways Than One to Preach a Text

Colleagues,

I shouldn't be surprised if today's topic strikes lots of you as odd, not to say silly. Statements of the obvious tend to have that effect on readers, and it's hard to imagine anything more obvious than an observation that any one text will yield many sermons. Has there ever been a seminarian who failed to discover this in the first week of his first course in preaching?

Then again, we human beings have a thing for patterns, grooves, ruts, and other devices that help us deal with the challenge of excessive possibility, and preachers are as prone to these as anyone. One way of coping with the heap of choices that any text presents is to bring a predetermined set of theological expectations to it, or require it to service a particular rhetorical pattern, or insist that it support some larger thematic objective that the preacher has in mind. I do this myself as a matter of course. So does every other preacher I've ever listened to over any length of time. So does every school of preaching, and every theological tradition. What is Crossings if not an ongoing argument for a patterned approach to the reading of texts?

As with everything, of course, patterns have their downside. If they discipline the eye to catch essentials, they also keep the eye from spotting useful ideas and approaches that might otherwise be noticed. Comes the day for every preacher, I suppose, when he or she is pretty much rehearsing familiar themes and ignoring any number of gems embedded in the preaching text that could well be lifted up to the glory of God and the praise of Christ.

At the end of last month we sent you a remarkable first sermon on the Good Samaritan text by Candice Stone, a seminary intern ([ThTheol #789](#)). We passed it along in part because we saw Candice replicating the interpretive pattern we're familiar with at Crossings. This emerged particularly in the way she associated her hearers with the characters in the story, locating them quickly with the fellow lying in the ditch and going nowhere unless a Samaritan named Christ should happen by to rescue them.

Today we send you another sermon on the same text ([Luke 10:25-37](#)). It was preached on Hilton Head Island, South Carolina, on that same day that Candice preached hers in University City, Missouri. The preacher in this case was the Rev. Richard Hoyer. Pr. Hoyer, a classmate and brother-in-law of Ed Schroeder, is retired from full-time ministry but continues, obviously, to supply pulpits as retired pastors do. He also follows Thursday Theology, and on reading Candice's effort was moved to send his along "in the hope that it too might provide wings for the Spirit." Indeed it does, we think. We also think that you'll be struck as we were by the marked difference in approach that Pr. Hoyer takes as he reads his audience, assesses the effect the text is having on them, and works out how to respond to that. Just as striking is the way he reaches for Gospel not so much from the text itself as from its companion passage, the appointed Epistle for the day, [Colossians 1:1-14](#). I didn't ask him, but I'll bet such a move is an aspect of his preaching pattern, which shows up also in the way he organizes the sermon under clear sub-headings. It's an older pattern than the one I use, and it's much older than Candice's. And it manages, I think, to deliver Gospel goods that neither of us would get around to. Enjoy them.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

Richard O. Hoyer

The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 10:25-37

“Tired of the Good Samaritan?”

People of God, sisters and brothers,

I. SICK OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN

A. ‘CAUSE WE’RE SICK OF OURSELVESAh, the parable of the Good Samaritan. Again. We get to hear this story only once every three years, but the Samaritan is in our face a lot more frequently than that, and, frankly, I’m tired of him. I suspect you are, too.

Everybody knows about the Good Samaritan. He’s become a part of our culture. “Be a good Samaritan,” people keep telling us, that is to say, “Help people in need, even if it’s out of your way, and at whatever cost or risk to yourself.” Yeah, well, that’s easy to say but a whole lot harder to do. One wonders if those who admonish us to be Good Samaritans are such themselves. Besides that, Good Samaritans often get hurt. People take advantage of them, think they’re fools. On the other hand, because it is so hard to be a Good Samaritan, the story is often watered down until it’s little more than the goey admonition, “Be nice!” I’m getting tired of hearing about him.

Well, don’t get me wrong. The Good Samaritan is indeed good as are those who emulate him. Power to them! What makes me sick and tired of the Good Samaritan is that, in comparison to him, I’m at best a mediocre Samaritan. What’s worse is that I’m afraid I don’t really want to be a Good Samaritan. Underneath my pious façade I’m afraid I subconsciously expect people to be independent, to take

care of themselves and not be a burden on society and increase my taxes. If people are hurting, well, let them suck it up and get back on their own two feet. So, if that's how I'm feeling down in my heart, then even when I'm being a mediocre Samaritan it's mostly fake. Artificial. That's why I'm sick of the Good Samaritan.

The truth is, we're really not all that good at all, are we? We are by nature a part of this human race that is not very nice. Look at what people are doing to each other these days in Syria. In Egypt. Iraq. Afghanistan. On and on. Look at what people have done in the past and are still doing: slavery, genocide, wars, religious persecutions, prejudice, intolerance, even little children bullying unmercifully. It's all so awful! And we're a part of the human race that does such things. We're as bad as any of those bad guys, or very possibly would be if we were in their shoes.

Remember what St. Paul called all this in our Second Lesson this morning? "The power of darkness." The power of darkness. We know what he means, don't we? This "human stain," as the novelist Philip Roth calls it, *is* rank and ugly, and it's a power so strong that it can overwhelm us if we let down our guard even a little. Maybe sometimes we can act a little bit like the Good Samaritan, but inside?

That's why we're sick of the Good Samaritan; it's because we're sick of ourselves.

B. AND SICK OF OUR FAILURES I think that lawyer who came to Jesus with the question that prompted this parable was pretty sick of himself too, however deep he'd pushed it down. But give him credit! Most people simply shrug their shoulders and say, "What do you expect? I'm only human."

They don't seem to realize that this human captivity to the "power of darkness" is the problem, not an excuse. We're not supposed to be this way, or act this way. We don't *have* to act this way, we choose to. And whatever it is inside us that does the choosing is obviously inclined to choose the evil. The "power of darkness."

Nor would most people recognize that this bondage to darkness is serious because we have a Creator who judges us. We are accountable to God for what we are and do in this darkness.

You know that, don't you? Surely you do, or you wouldn't be here. Well, that lawyer knew it, too. He knew he had a Judge. That's why he sought Jesus out and asked him, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" I suspect that underneath that question was the very real pain of living in captivity to the "power of darkness." He's not merely asking, "How can I get to heaven, someday, maybe, if there really is a heaven?" No, he's asking, "How can I be right with this God who judges me for what I do in this darkness? How can I escape the wrath I know I deserve?"

You ask that question too, don't you? Even if you've never said it out loud, deep down inside you're asking it. If not, you should be!

The answer Jesus gives doesn't seem to help much at all, at least not at first. "What is written in the law?" Jesus asks the lawyer. (We would have said, "What does the Bible say?" Same thing.) The lawyer replied, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." Look at that! The guy already knew the answer to his question. Jesus commends him: "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

So, if he already knew the answer, why did he ask the question? His anguish is related to those two little words at the end, where Jesus said to him, "do this." Do this? When I hear those words I want to shout out my despair, "Do this? Don't you think I would if I could?"

And then, after telling the story about the Good Samaritan, Jesus tells the lawyer, "Go and do likewise." That's no different from what he told the lawyer in the first place, "Love God, love your neighbor; do this and you will live." My heart sinks when I hear that. I feel like *I'm* the one who's been beaten and thrown into the ditch and left there to die. I can't go and do likewise, God! I can't be a Good Samaritan!

You see? Knowledge is not power. That's what Jesus is trying to get the lawyer, and us, to realize. Just because I know what I should be and what I should be doing doesn't mean I have the power to do it. Just because I know what a Good Samaritan is doesn't mean I can be one.

Ah, but we try. It's significant that in our Lord's parable the two people who "passed by on the other side" of the wretch dying in the ditch were a priest and a Levite (Levites were lay people who assisted the priests). These were good people, godly people.

Like us. By virtue of our Baptism we're all priests, serving at God's altar (which is what we're doing here). We're trying to be good, trying to keep the commandments, trying to be pious and faithful. We're pretty good at it too, by and large. Good, godly people!

And yet Jesus condemns us for passing by on the other side. Jesus is telling that lawyer, and us, that being religious doesn't necessarily make us good if it stays

only on the outside. What matters is inside, what's in our heart. What matters is what we are. What makes the Good Samaritan good is not merely what he did but what he was, inside. He had compassion because he was compassionate.

Well, we know that too, don't we? And knowing that makes me sick of the Good Samaritan, because I'm sick of myself and sick of my failures.

II. BUT GOD IS MAKING US ONE

A. GOD TRANSFERS US So what are we to do? Sounds just like that lawyer, doesn't it? "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Captive to the power of darkness, unable to be the Good Samaritan we know we ought to be, what are we to do?

The hard truth is that there's nothing we can do. The Samaritan was Good not so much because of what he *did*, but because of what he *was*: he had *compassion* for the wretch dying in the ditch. He loved his neighbor. But you know as well as I do that you can't *will* love, can't make yourself love. Maybe I can *act* like a Good Samaritan, a little bit, now and then, but I can't make myself *be* a Good Samaritan, can't create on my own that compassion that makes the Good Samaritan good.

Ah, but God can. God can make us Good Samaritans!

Listen to St. Paul in our Second Lesson: "[God] has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." What we can't do, God does. Though we be captive to the power of darkness, God has redeemed us, set us free! How? Paul says it: *by forgiving our sins*. God forgives us! You aren't a Good

Samaritan? That's terrible, but God forgives you. You don't do what you ought to do? Shame on you! But God forgives you. In the power of darkness, have you done all kinds of evil—are doing them still? You wretched sinner! But God forgives you.

Don't think it's easy! A holy God can't merely wave his hand and say, "Oh, forget it." How can the Holy One do that and still be holy? Forgiving us brought the God who is beyond the universe into humanity itself, into that very darkness that holds us in its power. Our forgiveness brought God to the cross. Who can comprehend that? Don't take your forgiveness lightly!

More than that, *let it work in you*. Not only has God rescued us from the power of darkness, he has also, as St. Paul says, "transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son." He has taken us from the darkness and brought us to himself. To put it another way, God, through the forgiveness worked out on that cross, is working in us so that we don't merely *act* like Good Samaritans, more or less, but *become* Good Samaritans here, in our hearts

B. AND IS CHANGING US So, are you sick and tired of hearing about the Good Samaritan? Listen to the Gospel: you are forgiven! Though we still live in the darkness, we have been rescued from its power and transferred into the kingdom of God's dear Son, brought close to the heart of God himself. Don't be tired of the Good Samaritan. After all, God is making you one. Let him!