

Deuteronomy 30:9-14 Pastor Bill Uetricht 5 Pentecost 7/14/19

Those of you who remember the days before GPS will recall experiences in securing directions that sounded a bit like this: “It’s very easy to get there. All you got to do is to take a left up here at the light, then a right when you get to McDonalds, a sharp left after you drive past my Uncle Fred’s place, and then a right after you go past the beauty salon. I don’t remember the road’s name. But you can’t miss it. It’s right there.”

This is what I thought about after confronting today’s readings. It’s all quite easy, but maybe it really isn’t.

The Book of Deuteronomy is trying to make it clear that the law business is not that complex. “Everything you need to know you learned in kindergarten,” Deuteronomy seems to be saying. You don’t have to climb up into heaven to find it. The commandment of God is not far away. It is not some esoteric, other-worldly reality that only really intelligent people can discover with their brilliance. No, what you need is *all right here*. You can’t miss it!

I appreciate that perspective. Sometimes what we think life is all about, what we are called to do, seems so complicated. But Deuteronomy wants us to know that it isn’t.

Deuteronomy is portrayed as a sermon of Moses that is being spoken when God’s people are about to enter the Promised Land. But what we know about the book is that it was written at a later point in Israel’s history when some in the nation had to deal with a new, difficult situation, when some of them had been sent off into exile. Exile threatened the nation’s understanding of itself and what it was called to do. Some folks were thinking that this new difficult situation meant that the law, Israel’s identity marker, was too removed from them now, too difficult to follow in a new and harsh environment. Deuteronomy, then, is cheering people on. “You can still do it. It’s not that difficult. It’s nearer to you than you realize. It’s already in your heart and in your mouth. You know it, so now you can do it.”

This advice takes me back to my high school days when the cheerleaders would at a football game say: “You can do; you can do it, if you put it. Buckle down, buckle down, do it, do it, do it.” Why I remember this insignificant memory in my life, I have no idea. But I do!

I appreciate this kind of perspective. It’s the advice of the direction giver: you can’t miss it. Honestly, some of the time we really know what to do. And we especially know that to do if we have learned it in the past, which points to the significance of learning the good and big stuff early in our lives. Sometimes we only know what to do because we have been taught what to do. It has been imprinted upon our souls and eventually spoken with our lips.

I cannot overestimate the importance of exposing our children to the stories and expectations of our faith. I cannot overstate the significance of weekly worship, Sunday School, confirmation, camp, youth group, Bible study. In these places our kids learn our big picture; they learn our identity markers, and in the process learn what they are to do. It becomes a part of them—so much a part of them that what they are to do is not foreign to them, but near to them. And when they stray they have something to come back to. That something haunts their lives! It haunts our lives.

Even if perhaps we were not drenched in the stories and expectations of our faith we probably still know what to do. The Bible, at the very beginning, tells us that we were made in the likeness and image of God. Our lives from the very beginning have had a stamp of the divine placed on them. Many of us spend a lot of our lives trying to *find* ourselves, as if our true selves are somewhere out there in some far off land—you know, the land of perfection, the land of wealth, popularity, power, fame, religious zealotry. But our true selves are not far off. They are right here. They are near. You and I are just busy covering them up—covering them up with all kinds of layers that aren’t about who we really are. These other layers are all about who other people think we ought to be, or we think we ought to be because we have bought into what they and the culture say matters. But we know

better. Who we are is *made in the image and likeness of God*. Who we are is *children of God*, grafted into a community through our baptism into Christ.

Knowing who we are we know what to do. Come on! As we watch what it going on at the border with children, we know what to do, we know what is right. And what is going on there isn't right. As we deal with those relatives from whom we have been alienated from for so long, we know what to do. A life-long commitment to bitterness and anger isn't our calling. We know that. We can do it!

Even a lawyer gets it today. He in Luke asks Jesus what he needs to do to have a life that really matters. Jesus responds, as he typically does, with a question. My wife hates when I do this kind of thing. "Where do you want to go to dinner?" she will ask. "Where do you want to go?" I will respond. "What do you think of this?" she will ask. "I don't know; what do you think?" Forgive me, Bev, I am just following in Jesus' footsteps!

Jesus's response to the lawyer's question about finding the good life entails these questions: "What is written in the law" and "What do you read there?" In other words, what do you already know? That law thing is near to you and is already on your lips. Well, yes, it is! "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, your soul, your strength, and your mind, and your neighbor as yourself."

It's all right here. You can't miss it. You know what to do. You know it, Jesus says. Now do it!

Now the lawyer—and I think you know that lawyers often quibble about words—wants to know what is meant by the word "neighbor." The word is somewhat ambiguous. Or at least what we want to believe it means is not always what we want to believe. Uh-oh! This is getting more complicated. Maybe you can miss it.

Jesus' response to the lawyer's clarification question is not a direct answer again. This time his response is a story. Sometimes plain words just don't do it. Sometimes it takes a story to get through to us, especially if your task involves unsettling us, taking us on a path that

isn't as easy as we think it might be, especially if we might indeed miss the destination.

Jesus in his story telling is often unsettling us. My friend Ellen Schoepf in her sermon this weekend says this about Jesus parables: They are "not meant to be comfortable, sweet stories. They were always meant to turn people's thinking inside out and upside down. In fact, one theologian calls Jesus' parables 'narrative time bombs' designed to explode people into a new awareness."

So it isn't always easy when it comes to Jesus. What we are to do and where we are going isn't always that apparent. And that is what Jesus' story about the compassionate Samaritan makes clear today. This story we feel okay about as the story initially unfolds. We feel like we know where we are going. I mean, many of us, even me, get some joy out of poking fun at religious officials. That the priest and the Levite (a member of a tribe whose task it was to perform religious duties) pass by the hurting man probably doesn't offend us too much. We enjoy it when the likes of Joel Osteen are revealed as people who won't open up their churches to hurricane victims. But we are really confounded by who does help out the wounded, more than likely, Jewish man. A Samaritan!

You got to get this! There are no such persons as *good* Samaritans. They are all bad. They are the enemy. They are Al Qaeda. They are the Viet Cong. They are the people you can't stand. They are the people you hate.

Hey! This was going along pretty well. And now you go messing with my orderly universe. And you *really* get in my face when you tell me that this nasty old Samaritan goes over the top in helping me out. He bandages my wounds. He pours oil and wine on them. He gives me my own animal, takes me to an inn, pays two days of wages to take care of me, and then offers to pay even more money if there are additional expenses. Wow! Doing what I need to do seems a lot more complicated. The people I hate are the people coming to my aid. Couldn't the one who rescues me be the one who votes like me, thinks

like me, looks like me, talks like me, is an ELCA pastor who went to the same seminary I did? Instead, it is some no-good Jimmy Swaggart fundamentalist right-winger who is tending to me. No way!

It's not all *right* here. I *can* miss it. This world seems far off from the one I know!

Yep, in some ways, it is! This world is the world of the kingdom of God. And while it is rooted in who we are as the beloved children of God, we often don't live out of who we are. And therefore, the destination can be missed.

You know, where Jesus is heading in the Gospel of Luke is no easy place. His face is set toward Jerusalem where he will be killed on a cross. Who wants to go there? Well, those who follow Jesus go there with him. He will become the victim who needs help. As we go with him we will become the victims whose lives cry out for mercy. And to be honest, do you really care who comes to your aid when you need help? Don't you just want help?

What if the bottom line is this: we're all wounded; we are all in need of mercy. Maybe then it is all quite simple. Maybe we do know what to do. We let go. We include. We become vulnerable. We embrace our enemies. We love and we allow ourselves to be loved. We give into the surprise of the God who shows up in the places and among the people we least expect.