

Taking the Long Road Home

Theodore Parker Unitarian Universalist Church

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READING Luke 10:25-37 The Parable of the Good Samaritan

²⁵ On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

²⁶ “What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?”

²⁷ He answered, “‘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, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

²⁸ “You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.”

²⁹ But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

³⁰ In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹ A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side.

³² So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. ³⁴ He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵ The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’

³⁶ “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”

³⁷ The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.”

Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”

READING excerpt from “A Time to Break Silence,” the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.

On the one hand we are called to play the good Samaritan on life's roadside; but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it is not haphazard and superficial. [True compassion] comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.

SERMON

Taking the Long Road Home

the Rev. Anne Bancroft

Parables, like myths, are not stories about things that happen only once. Parables from the Gospels or the Hebrew Scriptures or the Qu'ran or the Sufi tradition are useful teachings and meaning-makers

because in some fashion they happen over and over again, and because so often we find varied lessons within the same text. We find ourselves there in different points of entry depending on where we are in our own lives.

Several weeks ago I wrote about passing a man on my way to work who was holding a sign: “I’m homeless, and my children are hungry.” I was sitting at a stop sign, and when it changed I drove on. I didn’t give him a thing. And in the e-news I mentioned how ambivalent I felt about my decision.

“Why did I hesitate to hand him a \$20 bill . . . I had one in my wallet. I had a \$5 bill, too.”

And, I mentioned, “It’s really hard to see need up close and personal.” Except, of course, that the jaded side of me wondered if he was pulling a scam – it’s possible. Still, it’s hard to see and take the time to figure out how to react to someone begging next to your car window, no matter how many times it happens.

I suspect it’s why the priest and the Levite stayed on the other side of the road. And why I considered driving home a different way, so as not to be confronted with a needy soul on my journey.

The road in question in today’s parable – Jericho Road, that Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke about in his address at the Riverside Church in New York City (an amazing edifice and institution) – is a real place, though he was referencing it metaphorically. I discovered recently that Jericho is arguably the oldest city in the world. Situated on a trade route, it has served, in its history, as a winter resort for rulers and the rich. The 15-and-a-half mile stretch of road that connects Jericho to Jerusalem was well-known as a place of danger, the route that people traveled to do business back and forth. They would have been transporting goods to sell or the money from having sold them, unlike Hammond Pond Parkway, which is where I was driving when confronted by the man with the sign – not typically considered a dangerous route to anywhere.

I know what King was suggesting – that it is the institutions of inequality that need dismantling in order to make any road and every road safe, not dissimilar from what he was saying in his letter from Birmingham Jail, that injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.

What struck me when I reflected on King’s words this year, and I’m sure it was influenced by my recent experience, was how we choose our journeys in the meantime. Between now and the time that justice is everywhere, when every Jericho Road is a safe place for all – which I would venture to guess will not be in my lifetime, at least, so there is plenty of time to consider – how do we choose the paths we travel in our lives. Before heaven is here on earth, or the Beloved Community is achieved, how much suffering are we willing to confront? How much risk are we willing to manage? How many Jericho Roads, imperfect by definition, are we willing to travel?

Remember that our theme this month is intention. This is a good question to ponder in our intention setting at the beginning of this year, 2017: how much safety do we each require – and it could be

physical OR emotional? How willing are we to live at the edges? And, how is it we organize our lives accordingly?

We don't always have a choice, of course. Sometimes our livelihoods require us to travel in risky places; certainly life sets challenges before us in myriad ways. Like the child who finds him or herself in a new school, things happen to us that we have to manage because we don't HAVE a choice. Illness, for example, or family discord; financial struggle, or spiritual dis-ease. These are often unknown and risky places, and we don't necessarily choose them.

But often we DO have a choice – like the three people in our parable having choice as to how to respond to the man on the side of the road, there IS often the opportunity in our lives to choose our path: to travel what we know might be a risky road, sometimes a long and risky road (like helping someone in need not knowing the consequence) OR – alternatively – to choose what we imagine will be a safer route home, the shortcut, the predictable; like keeping our windows rolled up. What is your inclination? Forget actually having to decide whether to help anyone – are we even willing to put ourselves on the risky path?

I keep coming back to my story about the man with the sign because it's one I think many of us can relate to. How often do we walk or drive by needy people in this city? Or, in this church? I actually thought about driving a different way home the day or two after I passed the man with the sign; instead, I put a \$20 bill in my cup holder and sure enough – there he was the next day so I stopped and handed it to him. I watched him look at it. "Wow, thanks," he said, and I drove away.

They're not the same: helping someone beaten down, taking them to safety, checking back another day and covering the costs versus handing someone \$20 by the side of the road. But they are choices in the same vein. What, if anything, are we willing to do for another? And how will we know if we never put ourselves in the situation that requires us to choose? It's likely we do have the capacity to avoid most of the Jericho Roads we might travel – many of us have that privilege. We CAN choose the shortcut and avoid the risks; but, at what cost – to the other, but also to ourselves?

There is something imminent about the unknown journey, isn't there? – that if we are willing to engage with has much to teach us. The place of encounter is a place of vulnerability AND opportunity.

We're in a curious time right now in this country, relative to the unknown, with many roads ahead and likely many choices to make. In a way, the next four years begin on Friday. I want to share part of an article I read recently by CBS newsman Dan Rather – an unlikely religious resource, perhaps, but useful, nonetheless. The title: "Now is a time when none of us can afford to remain seated or silent."

<http://www.dailykos.com/story/2016/11/22/1603094/-Dan-Rather-sounds-the-alarm-Now-is-a-time-when-none-of-us-can-afford-to-remain-seated-or-silent>

Our Declaration of Independence bequeaths us our cherished foundational principle: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their

Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

He continues: "These truths may be self-evident but they are not self-replicating. Each generation has to renew these vows. This nation was founded as an opposite pole to the capriciousness of an authoritarian monarch. We set up institutions like a free press and an independent court system to protect our fragile rights. We have survived through bloody spasms of a Civil War and a Civil Rights Movement to extend more of these rights to more of our citizens. But the direction of our ship of state has not always been one of progress. We interned Japanese Americans, Red Baited during the McCarthy era, and more. I feel the rip tide of regression once again swelling under my feet. But I **intend** to remain standing."

I intend to remain standing. Rather than sitting this one out, or watching silently from the sidelines, or taking the shortcut home - I intend, Rather says, to remain proverbially standing.

This choice is akin to choosing the Jericho Road, with all its unknown risks and dangers – and here's a truth.

I want to be standing like that, too. I want to be braver. In these days, I want to be bolder. I wonder if you do, too. I don't want to think twice about opening my window to someone in need. I don't want to live with that kind of uncertainty. Marianne Williamson's words come to mind: "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure." I don't want to be afraid of my power anymore. I want to put it to good use.

It begs the question of why, of course. In the parable, the lawyer is asking what one must do to gain eternal life. I suspect many of us, as Unitarian Universalists, are not necessarily worried about eternal life, though I can't be SURE for each of you.

What feels more compelling to me than my eternal life is what I can be doing for yours, right now, in THIS life.

I watched a TEDx recently with psychologist and science journalist, Daniel Goleman. It was called, "Why aren't we all Good Samaritans?" You can see why it caught my attention!

Goleman says that new neuroscience research suggests that our human default wiring is to help each other, that we have mirror neurons that incline us to empathy but that we don't always respond accordingly because we are often preoccupied and don't fully notice the other. We are victims, he says, of a system that points us elsewhere.

Where does it point us? We know this: we are victims of a system that points us to more is better, mine should be best, a focus on what my friend Diane used to say . . . "my needs, my goals." We are

victims of a system that says safety at all costs for us and ours, don't worry about the rest, and in support of an economy that prizes self-satisfaction.

It's a system that too often leaves the vulnerable side-lined and out in the cold.

So, let's stop being victims. Let's stick to the long and uncertain road home. Let's not take the easy route.

If anything is going to change the proverbial Jericho Road it will be our presence on it, our continued and committed presence on the long road that most people in this life travel: good people, not so good people; happy people, sad people, sassy people, needy and wanting people. Let's stay on THAT road!

That's the road, I think, where they're Standing on the Side of Love, right?

We had a concert here last Friday where the vocalist, James Dargan, sang a short piece called, "Love is a Weary Noun." Oh, my, I thought – that is a poignant observation. The word gets used so much, that's for sure, but the actions it inspires – that's up to us.

If your love is weary and in need of respite, by all means, rest. Restore your rhythms and find your balance – there is, there must be, rest for the weary, sometimes.

And, there will be many on the road ready to welcome you when the choice feels right.

Our chalice lighting came to us from former UUA President Bill Schulz, who also reminds us that "the Divine for us – whatever it in essence be – is not confined to a transcendent realm, its ramparts guarded by the scholarly elite. On the contrary, the Holy is made manifest to every one of us . . . in the transactions of the Everyday. It lies curled, in other words, in the very bosom of our experience." (from Unitarian Universalism in a New Key – Green Sounds)

Every lesson, then, is holy – every encounter, every effort – maybe the riskier the holier because they require us to stretch.

Victims no more – in this bold era, this uncertain time, may we choose the path that both challenges and teaches us, that calls us to take our weary loves and put them to good use in the service of the holy every day.

I hope you will travel with me on the long road home.

I also hope you will sing with me, our closing hymn, Standing on the Side of Love!

BENEDICTION

In and Out of Time ~ Maya Angelou

The sun has come.
The mist has gone.
We see in the distance...
our long way home.
I was always yours to have.
You were always mine.
We have loved each other in and out of time.

When the first stone looked up at the blazing sun
and the first tree struggled up from the forest floor
I had always loved you more.
You freed your braids...
gave your hair to the breeze.
It hummed like a hive of honey bees.
I reached in the mass for the sweet honey comb there....
Mmmm... God how I love your hair.

You saw me bludgeoned by circumstance.
Lost, injured, hurt by chance.
I screamed to the heavens loudly screamed....
Trying to change our nightmares into dreams...

The sun has come.
The mist has gone.
We see in the distance our long way home.
I was always yours to have.
You were always mine.
We have loved each other in and out
in and out
in and out
of time.

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May we go and do likewise.
Amen.