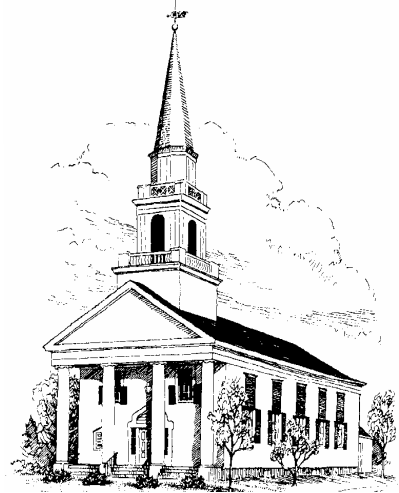


Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from July 15, 2007
Rev. Barbara J. Libby
“The Word Is Very Near You”

Scriptures:
Deuteronomy 30:9-14
Luke 10:25-37



We hear our Old Testament lesson as such a reassuring piece of scripture. It is comforting to hear that “God will make us abundantly prosperous in all our undertakings”, isn’t it? We can feel good when we hear that if we remain faithful and observe the laws which God provides for us that we can rest with God. We are reminded here that if we love God with all our heart and with all our soul, then God can be very near to us—even as near as in our own mouth and in our own hearts. This text makes it seem quite clear and simple—love and obey God and all will be well.

So when the lawyer asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life, Jesus asks the man about this law. The lawyer does know that the law says “You shall love God with your heart, soul, strength, and mind and your neighbor as yourself.” Then the lawyer, assuming he knows the answer already about who his neighbor is, asks Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?”

It is then that Jesus tells this simple story of the Good Samaritan. Suddenly we are all challenged out of our comfort zone for this simple, yet straightforward story, told in such a way that translates easily down through the ages, may not make us feel quite as comfortable as our first reading from Deuteronomy this morning.

This simple story may remind us of times when we were the one hurt or ignored in the ditches of our lives. This story may remind us of times when we were like that priest or Levite who walked by on the other side, not getting involved with the stranger in need. Perhaps some of us have even been the Samaritan who did go to the rescue.

Jesus responds to the lawyer’s question with this story of the Good Samaritan. Yet, upon closer inspection, the news is not easy or encouraging. His point seems to be that our neighbor is to be anybody who needs us. (Buechner, *Listening to Your Life*, p. 193/194) You may notice that the lawyer’s response is left unrecorded.

Well, you can relax. It is not my intent today to make judgments about any of us here gathered. I’m not here to berate or to judge anyone nor is it up to me to implicate anyone with guilt about those neighbors that we have left uncared for. I do have a few stories to share and a few reflections on how the Good Samaritan story informs our understanding of compassion and

how such a story helps us to recognize that God's word is indeed very near to us.

Perhaps, we begin by looking at the word *compassion*. The word *compassion* literally means "to suffer with" — *com* meaning "with", and *passion* meaning "suffering"; hence, *compassion* means "to suffer with". This definition does remind us that compassion is not just having a sentimental feeling of pity about something or wanting to do something nice for someone else. Rather, it suggests that real compassion means sharing the pain or suffering with another.

When Jesus responded to the lawyer's question "Who is my neighbor?" by telling the story, he was suggesting that the requirement of love that he wants to point to goes beyond all the rules and the laws that they have learned so well. There's more. Jesus seems to suggest that we have to love lavishly. We have to show compassion with our lives. We have to suffer with another with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.

Jesus was probably more concerned with the extent to which we care, more than fretting about the details or the methods. Jesus pointed to a model of compassion as a fundamental way for us to be with one another. I think Jesus knew that this model was not an easy message for anyone to hear.

Let me share a story with you here. Last year, a friend drove down a tree-lined street in an unfamiliar neighborhood. There were distant voices of children screeching in delight and folks moving up and down that quiet suburban neighborhood. The friend noticed a young man, about 14 or 15, sitting on the edge of the sidewalk. He had a pasty white face and an unfocused look in his eye.

As my friend passed by, the young man's eyes seemed to implore him to stop. But he didn't stop immediately. He had a car right on his tail and he hesitated. Then he wondered if it was worth it to go back. Something in that face, those staring eyes, compelled him to turn the car around & go back. When he arrived, the boy was lucid but very weak.

"Hi, my name's John," the boy said, trying to offer his hand in an introduction. Clearly, even the attempt at motion almost caused him to pass out. He was clearly in terrible pain. Then the boy named John explained to my friend that he had been skateboarding down the street when his wheel caught on a crack and he had tumbled onto the street hard. He had managed to drag himself over to the curb to avoid the cars which kept on driving by

Well, my friend managed to help John into his car and took him to the nearest hospital where John did faint as he was getting into a wheel chair in the emergency room door. The attendant said, "He probably has broken his hip," and then they took him away.

You know what really got to my friend? What he found hardest to stomach was the realization that at least a dozen people must have passed John by sitting there on the sidewalk before he had turned his car around and came back to check on him. He even remembers that when he had just gotten out of his car two, persons had literally stepped over John on the sidewalk, completely ignoring his need for help. I'm sure most of those people had probably heard the parable of the Good Samaritan somewhere along the line. Perhaps they had never really

taken it personally.

Here's another story I read recently that speaks to this issue of compassion. Elie Weisel tells this story in his book entitled *Night*. Weisel's book chronicles his experiences in a Nazi concentration camp during World War II. Here Weisel remembers:

The Nazi soldiers herded the Jews out of their barracks before dawn into a thickly falling snow in order to wait for a train that would transport them to another camp. Without food or drink for three days, the Jews stood in the snow till evening, forbidden to sit or even bend over. The snow formed a white layer on each of their shoulders. One thirsty man finally took out his spoon and he began to eat the snow that had accumulated on the shoulders of the person in front of him. The act spread through the line until the collection of separate individuals, each of whom had been struggling alone with their pain, became a community sharing their suffering together.

That is how we survive as a human family, isn't it? We survive together by becoming a place of nourishment for our brothers and sisters. We survive by sharing our sufferings in a great and holy act of compassion.

Sometimes we prefer to walk by on the other side. Sometimes we would much rather keep our distance from the problems and pain and concerns of others. Maybe we have enough of our own problems or maybe we are so bent over or preoccupied by life that we literally miss seeing those who lie in the ditch beside us. Sometimes we would just really rather not get involved.

However, Jesus was really quite clear here. We are called to get involved. We are called to have compassion for others. We are invited to take seriously what it means to have God as the sovereign over all our lives. If we take God's word into us, it should make a difference in the way we live our lives.

Jesus was saying it is not enough to study the law; we must do it. He said we need not only hear the word, experience it and feel it close to us. We need to live it and practice it, too. Jesus was re-defining community here. He was demolishing all the old boundary expectations.

Hildegard of Bingen was a woman who lived in the 12th century and who is now being rediscovered. She was an abbess, a poetess, a musician, an artist, a healer, a theologian, a prophet and a mystic. She wrote this poem about her understanding of the word of God:

*Without the word of God no creature has being.
God's word is in all creation, visible and invisible.
The word is living, being, spirit, all verdant greening, all creativity.
All creation is awakened, called, by the resounding melody,
God's invocation of the word.
This word manifests in every creature.
Now this is how the spirit is in the flesh—the word is indivisible from God.*
(*Meditations with Hildegard of Bingen*, Gabriele Uhlein, p. 49)

Perhaps, today, we simply need to be reminded of a simple truth: that every time we help one another, every time we reach out with compassion, every time we reach out to “suffer with” another human being, we bring the word of God closer to all of us. Every time we offer someone else a moment of kindness, we help bring the love of God and the abiding presence of Jesus Christ into that moment in time. It is in those moments when we show mercy and compassion that we each catch a glimpse of the kingdom of God breaking into this world.

We survive by sharing our sufferings in a great & holy act of compassion. Let us go out and do it. Amen.