

“I Am My Attitudes”

Luke 10:25-37

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost – July 11, 2010

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It’s risky to ask a preacher a question! You may end up having to listen to a sermon! Such was the case when a smart lawyer raised his hand in a crowd and asked a rabbi, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” He got a sermon, but it wasn’t too boring because the preacher told a story about a man who risked his life by trying to make it on his own on a highway often targeted after dark by notorious, cut-throat thieves. The solitary man was mugged, robbed, and left on the side of the road semi-conscious. It turned out that a most unlikely person stopped to help him, used his first aid kit to treat his wounds, drove him to the nearest motel, and paid the motel manager for a couple nights of accommodation for the victim.

The lawyer had listened with interest and to his credit got the point because when the Jewish preacher, who happened to be Jesus, asked a question the lawyer was able to provide the correct answer. Jesus asked: “Which of the people who encountered the victim on the side of the road acted in a neighborly way towards him?” The lawyer answered, “The one who showed mercy.” Jesus said, “You are right. Now you go and do likewise!”

“The Good Samaritan” is one of the most famous stories in the world. It is so familiar that most of us have stopped hearing it. Or we have tucked it away as an example of classic first century discipleship that seems to have little relevance to the more complicated world of the 21st century. In a way it’s too bad that this story has inherited the title of “The Good Samaritan.” All too easily it has become a morality tale for do-gooders. Such an interpretation misses the point because this parable of Jesus is *not* about morality; it is about *mercy*. Those of you who were here last Sunday will recall that I focused on the theme of “mercy” in my sermon. We reminded ourselves last week that we can expect to experience mercy as long as we express mercy.

The problem is that not everyone has a merciful attitude toward people in need. Indeed, people have many different attitudes. In a very real sense it is quite true to say that we are our attitudes. Elwood Chapman in his book *Up Your Attitude! Changing the Way you look at Life*

defines “attitude” as “the way you mentally look at the world around you. It is how you view your environment and your future. It is the focus you develop toward life itself.” We choose the attitude with which we view our world. Art Linkletter once said, “Things turn out best for people who make the best of the way things turn out.” We choose how we will look at the circumstances and people around us, and that creates our attitudes. It is not exaggerating to say that we are an accumulation of attitudes. We say that we “get an attitude” about something or someone and choose to act according to the attitudes we have created for ourselves.

People react differently from me because their attitudes are different from mine. It isn't that some people have it better than others, making it easier for them to have better attitudes. No, we all face trials and tribulations. However, some people with the worst suffering in life seem to possess the most positive attitudes to deal with them. It's their choice. We are our attitudes.

I invite you now to look at this well-known Parable of the Good Samaritan and focus on three timeless and common human attitudes illustrated by the characters involved.

The first attitude may be summarized in the phrase: “*What is yours is mine.*” This attitude is best portrayed by the robber in Jesus' story. The chances are that no one sitting here is planning to commit a robbery on their way home from church. When I use the phrase, “What is yours is mine,” I am not asking for a literal meaning ...like literally stealing another person's belongings ...but rather the broader meaning of this attitude. Let me provide a couple of examples: it is the attitude that leads a person to think, “I need to excel, so I don't mind taking and using other people's strengths and abilities for my own benefit ...to make me look good ...to build my *ego*.” Have you ever known someone who refuses to let another person have their moment of glory ...who will try to do everything to rob that person of their worth, or diminish the praise they have earned and the joy that they deserve?

People today want a lot for themselves. “What is yours is mine,” is, sadly, a very common attitude in our society. And there are subtle ways to commit this kind of robbery. We are reminded again today that anything less than total integrity is robbery in God's eyes. We may think that small departures from integrity are no big deal. I may cook up some scheme or hatch some notion as a clever way to get ahead, but if it involves tricking or defrauding you so that what is yours becomes mine at any cost, I am as guilty as the robber in Jesus' parable.

The second attitude illustrated in this parable is: ***“What is mine is my own.”*** The priest and Levite belong to this category and illustrate this attitude. They are the clergy in the parable: upright, moral, responsible religious leaders of their day. They hurried on by. They were not breaking any laws. They probably did feel some concern as they viewed this man’s battered body. But hopefully, someone else – not as important or busy or rushed as they were – would have the time to stop and help. Most people would say they were just minding their own business. The priest and Levite knew that for them, a different duty called – their duty to serve in the temple. If by chance the victim in the gutter was dead and they touched him – then they would become unclean according to Jewish law – unable to fulfill their religious duties in the temple. No, they clung to what they considered exclusively their own. Fear and anxiety would have caused them to want to protect what they had from defilement at all costs. Someone else would have to worry about the man in the ditch. The priest and Levite passed by on the other side of Jericho road with the attitude, “what is mine is my own.”

A person who chooses this attitude will attempt to justify it by saying things like, “I must make use of all the opportunities in front of me without bothering about others. I will not share anything, nor do I like to receive anything from others.” This is a lonely selfish group. When a neighbor gets sick the “what is mine is my own” people are tempted not to visit, saying: “It would be better not to disturb her while she is so sick.” When someone is in financial need, they may say something like, “God has allowed this situation, let us pray for him!” When someone is in need of a helping hand they may say, “Let her suffer, so that she will learn through her mistakes.” When someone makes a mistake, they may say: “It is not my job to correct him,” and then they remain silent to maintain the relationship.

This attitude, “what is mine is my own” is not as rare as we may think. From time to time most religious people must confess that they fall into this category and need to ask God for mercy ...and that includes you and me.

The third attitude in Jesus’ parable is this: ***“What is mine is yours, if you need it.”*** It was illustrated by the Samaritan who decides to do something different. The Samaritan chooses to assist the victim. Samaritans, as you recall, were the enemies, the outcasts, the heretics among the good Jewish people in Jesus’ day. They did not follow dietary or cleanliness laws; they worshiped at a temple other than the one in Jerusalem; they even read a different version of the

Torah. And yet Jesus purposely makes a point by focusing his story on a hated Samaritan who displays the attitude: “what is mine is yours, if you need it.”

What separates the despised Samaritan from the “religious” priest and Levite is the quality of *mercy*. We’re back to that theme of mercy again! Two weeks in a row ...I have a feeling God is trying to impress something on us! When we think, “what is mine is yours, if you need it,” we are thinking mercifully and reflecting a merciful attitude. Being merciful does not mean that we have to give all of our property to our neighbors, and the needy. Rather, it is to help others with our best.

Luke’s text fleshes out the meaning of mercy as he records this parable of Jesus. Luke tells us that when the Samaritan saw the man on the road “he was moved with *compassion*” – this word, “compassion,” literally means “his heart melted within him.” It is compassion that moves one to adopt the attitude, “what is mine is yours, if you need it.” Compassion put the man to work to express his attitude in action: immediately he went to the victim, bandaged his wounds, poured oil and wine on his battered skin, and took him to an inn where he left plenty of money for his care. Compassion in this story involved more than a warm feeling or a quick prayer. It involved touching, lifting, sweating, paying, and caring in the most concrete ways.

We have talked about the different attitudes of people. We have seen that it is true to say that we are our attitudes. Three different kinds of people displayed three different attitudes towards a neighbor in this parable. Let us ask ourselves once again: Do we have the attitude of the robber, saying, “What is yours is mine?” Do we have the attitude of the priest and Levite, saying, “What is mine is my own?” Do we reflect the attitude of the Samaritan, saying, “What is mine is yours, if you need it?”

I think we all get the point of the Gospel lesson today. God is searching for people, hopefully like you and me, whose hearts and minds are synchronized so as to express mercy towards our neighbors. “Who was neighbor to the victim?” The lawyer answered correctly: “The one who showed mercy.” Notice next how Jesus’ story of the Good Samaritan ends with a command, which is also an initiation. Jesus looks directly at the lawyer – Jesus looks directly at you and me – and he says: “Go and do likewise.”

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