

May I speak in the name of God, Giver, Forgiver and Lover. Amen.

In the movie 'The International' we encounter a relic of the cold war, a former colonel from Communist East Germany. The film is set some twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and an agent from Interpol interviews the colonel. Interpol want to know why a former Communist is now working for one of the largest private banks in the world. The colonel responds, "everything only ever make sense in fiction. In real life, things rarely make sense."

The question before us this morning is a really simple one. Is our gospel fiction? Or is it real? To put it another way, does it make sense or doesn't it?

I suspect that many of us would like the gospel to make sense. I also suspect that for many of us a lot of the time the gospel simply doesn't make sense. So much of the time the good news of Jesus Christ seems to be practically inseparable from the bad news. Whether we are being instructed to give away our possessions, commanded to love our enemies, or required to forgive those who slight us, so much about the gospel just doesn't make sense.

And as if to add insult to injury, when the gospel appears to make sense, it is frequently only because we haven't really understood it. What the text appears to be saying may seem perfectly believable at first sight. But when you dig a little deeper you discover that the truth is more complicated.

Take this morning's story of the Samaritan. At first sight it seems to be a straightforward story about helping those in need. The

Samaritan is the one who does not avoid the man who was left for dead. By contrast, the priest and the Levite go out of their way to avoid the man who has been robbed. So far it all makes sense, and so far, it all sounds pretty straightforward.

But while it may sound straightforward to us, there would have been nothing straightforward about the story for the young lawyer for whom Jesus tells the story. The lawyer knew, as a law abiding Jew of the first century, that there are two, possibly three, major problems with the story of the Samaritan. The first, is that it was the religiously correct thing to pass by on the other side and not become contaminated with the injured man. The second, is that the Samaritans were an object of considerable disdain within the Jewish community. The third, is that we need to remember (and this is arguable) that being robbed may well have implied some kind of anterior negative judgment on the man by God.

To understand the story we need to translate it into terms we can comprehend. There are of course many ways of doing this. But let us imagine for a moment that the man in the story is someone from Arizona who after visiting a country against medical advice caught an infectious disease and is now placed in proper medical quarantine. Instead of a priest and a Levite passing him by in our contemporary version a doctor and a registered nurse observe the man from a distance without breaching the quarantine. But the man is in distress and looking for words of comfort. In the retelling it is an illegal immigrant working as a hospital cleaner who decides to breach the medical quarantine in order to hold the man's hand and offer him human comfort.

Of course the Good Samaritan is not simply a story about illegal immigrants. It is a story about all those who society decides to look down upon. But Jesus is pretty clear. The person who understands best who God wants us to care for is the person who is often least cared for by society. In Hanover the Good Samaritan is more likely to be a member of a local union working for Dartmouth College, commuting in for an hour from some part of rural Vermont. In White River Junction judging from a recent article on the new Co-op by Dan Mackie the Good Samaritan might be the person from Hanover with a trust fund.

This is only half the point of the story, though. The Good Samaritan can of course be every single one of us. But it can only be us if we are ready to challenge the status quo and the socio-economic order of our day. What Jesus is really teaching us is that in order to serve God properly we need to be able to understand the blind spots in our culture. We also need to be alert to how society imposes hierarchy, and we need to be strong enough to challenge the hierarchies that diminish the dignity and value of others.

One of the most pervasive forms of hierarchy here in the Upper Valley is the professionalization and sense of duty that pervade most of our working relationships. In the original story of the Good Samaritan the priest and the Levite were operating according to the acceptable standards of professional conduct of the day. And it is thanks to a professional, a lawyer, that Jesus even tells the story. As we all know professional codes of conduct and standards of duty are essential to the proper functioning of any society. A society without professional standards would not be a society so much as a state of nature, an anarchy. So there is much to be said in favor of proper professional codes of conduct.

But here is the rub. Jesus reminds his listeners that professional boundaries and codes can also be limiting. While we need them, we run the risk of neglecting God's commands if we think they are all we need for a flourishing society. Part of what Jesus teaches is that there are times when we need to step outside of societal convention. And nowhere is this more important than when it comes to ministry in the church.

For too long the clergy have been treated as a professional class much the same as doctors or teachers. But where we over-professionalize the clergy we run the risk of thinking that only the clergy can do ministry. As any good teacher or doctor knows, good teaching and good healthcare involve collaborative work. In the same way, good ministry is collaborative. It cannot be done by the clergy alone. After all, ministry is the responsibility of every baptized Christian.

The story of the Good Samaritan reminds us that the non-professional, the person who is not bound by certain standards of care and duty, who has much to give. We don't know much about the Samaritan other than that the Samaritans were particularly despised. But we know that it was the professionals, rigorously following their codes of ethics, who failed to help the man in need.

Culturally we have been taught to believe that only those who have a degree or a qualification are properly equipped for certain jobs. And there is some truth to that. But having an M.Div or a degree in theology is not necessary for doing the work of God. At this very moment in time there are people like the man who was robbed and left for dead in desperate need. Here in the Upper Valley people are homeless, sick, jobless, bereaved, fearful, lonely, overworked and

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vulnerable. They need the assistance of the church. They need your assistance. Few of us are called to become professional counselors or psychotherapists. But every single one of us is called to become a Good Samaritan, a neighbor to someone in need. May you discern who your neighbor is: and may God help each of us overcome the conventions that make it so hard to help those most in need.

Ultimately it is not through *understanding* the Good Samaritan, but by *becoming* the Good Samaritan that the gospel starts to make sense. Amen.