

## **In Unexpected Places**

Lk 10: 25-37, Deut 30: 9-14

July 14, 2019

Rev. Donna Vuilleumier

Luke 10:25-37

<sup>25</sup>Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” <sup>26</sup>He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” <sup>27</sup>He answered, “You shall 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 your neighbor as yourself.” <sup>28</sup>And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.” <sup>29</sup>But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” <sup>30</sup>Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. <sup>31</sup>Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. <sup>32</sup>So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. <sup>33</sup>But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. <sup>34</sup>He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. <sup>35</sup>The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ <sup>36</sup>Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” <sup>37</sup>He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

---

What is an unexpected place to find God? Where have you been surprised to find God in the actions of someone you would least expect to reflect God’s love and compassion?

At the Brookside Nursing and Rehab Center in Webster, MA, there is a small rose garden and seating area that is a quiet little respite corner for residents and staff. Known as ‘Dawn’s Place’, it is a place for private meditation or a conversation for two. It is a peaceful corner, a place to rest from the worries of illnesses, family concerns, or other stresses. It has been a welcome oasis for many from times of chaos, pain and difficult days.

‘Dawn’s Place’ was a gift to the residents and the staff. Many times such havens are the gift of a grateful family in honor of a loved one, or a memorial gift celebrating a long time employee. This rose garden however came from the most surprising, the most unexpected giver, someone who was known to take away things, someone known to create chaos rather than calm. Someone who would hardly be thought of someone reflecting the face, mercy and compassion of God. Dawn was God in an unexpected place.

Dawn had lived a very wild life. She had been a teenage runaway and lived a life of drug use and alcohol abuse in a gang and then a biker group. She lived with only occasional care for her mental health illness and that was during times in prison for theft, forgery, prostitution, drug possession or assault. She had colorful language and could have even easily embarrassed Richard Pryor. She loved to tell people that her tombstone would read, “She wasn’t here long but she knew how to party.”

Her hard living had made her a tough, self-reliant, untrusting woman. The world was a dark and mean place, people were only out for themselves and what they could take from you. She never trusted anyone because then she would be vulnerable prey for showing such weakness.

In time, this lifestyle caught up to Dawn. During her last prison stay she was diagnosed with AIDS and other medical problems. With no way to care for herself or family to take her in, Dawn's prison release was to a nursing home. She quickly found the nursing home to be its own prison. She shared a room with 3 other women, all old enough to at least be her mother if not her grandmother.

The rules and routine of the nursing facility, the quality of the food, and the inability to have medication when she wanted led Dawn to act out verbally to other staff and residents, and she became the unproven suspect in many petty thefts. She snuck out of the facility to get high. She did not want to be there, nor did Brookside want her there, but the courts prevailed.

This forced togetherness and her increasing health limits began to change Dawn, and the staff's response to her. She began to see her roommates as elderly, ill women, as neighbors, not as annoying and loud idiots who yelled over the volume of her TV. She gradually softened to see the other residents as people who had lived their lives, had had careers, families, interests, dreams and goals, yet now were living the last of their lifetime with physical and mental declines. She saw how isolated and lonely many of them were because they had outlived their loved ones, or their families lived away, and yet others who had been abandoned.

Dawn took on the role of daughter to the residents. She knew them all by name, she learned what she could about their life stories and she spent time with them. She mourned them when they died. Her long-denied inner gentleness also began to be shown to the staff. She told them jokes on tough days and began to show appreciation for their care of her failing body. In some ways she remained the Dawn of old at times, still fighting and feisty at times, but she learned that the ways of her old life no longer served her interests, or anyone else.

As AIDS and a lung disease progressed to their final stages, Dawn wanted to leave something to the residents and staff who had become such a healthy, helpful and important part of her life. They had welcomed her when no one else would. They did not reject, punish or use her. In Dawn's grandiose way of thinking, she announced to her hospice team that with the time she had left she would go to nursing school so that she too could take care of the residents and help the staff when they were short-handed. While a most unrealistic goal, this was an entryway to find what she could do. After many ideas and discussions came the idea of Dawn's Place. She designed it and helped to create it. Days after Dawn's Place was complete and seeing it just once, she passed away. For someone who had lived such a tormented life, she passed away peacefully, leaving an unexpected gift reflecting the face of God within that she had only recently begun to let shine.

What is an unexpected place to find God? Where have people been surprised to find God in the actions of someone least expected to reflect God's love and compassion?

Jesus told what we have come to know as the most famous parable to teach someone the true meaning of the word 'neighbor'. The neighbor is the one who shows mercy, the one who shows God's action in the world.

A man is beaten, robbed and left for dead. A priest and a Levite pass him by, but a Samaritan cares for the wounded man, tends to his many needs.

Those who heard Jesus tell this story of neighbor and mercy would have expected a Jewish hero, not the twist that happened here.

The role of the priest was to take care of the temple in continuous worship and raise animals for daily sacrifices. Maintaining the temple service correctly mandated strict purity regulation to ensure God's presence. For the priest to have touched or even come near the injured man he would have been defiled, putting his service at risk. As a priest with religious duties he would not have been expected to provide physical care for another.

The Levite assisted in important temple roles and had far less rigid rules of purity. The Levite could have helped the beaten man and could have been the hero of the story. Whether too busy, or fearful of being attacked by the robbers as well or feeling personally inadequate to care for the severely injured man, he justified to himself why he chose to not help the man on the side of the road. That self-justification though has many consequences. It stopped him from seeing the need to care for others. It stopped him from recognizing the presence of God in both neighbors and enemies. When the Levite, when we, fail to see and help those in need, we risk missing the saving presence of God. We miss seeing God in our midst.

Yet the one who did assist, and assisted in the most generous ways possible, was a Samaritan, a despised enemy of the Jews.

Those who heard Jesus tell this story of neighbor and mercy would have expected a Jewish hero, not the twist that they did here. Jesus' ultimate lesson was not just about mercy and neighbors, but also that God shows up in unexpected places.

God comes to us as a newborn child in a manger, as a refugee fleeing Herod, as a young man seeking baptism, as a healer of the untouchables, as a learner and a listener, as one hurt by others, as one betrayed, as one crucified and risen. God comes to us where and when we least expect. God comes to us at our weakest and most vulnerable places. God comes to us in the sick, in the frail, in the grieving, in the tired, in those fleeing danger, in the lonely, in the abused.

Jesus asks, "Who is your neighbor?". We say "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus says to us, "Go and do likewise." Amen.

---