

By the Rev. Karen Faye Siegfriedt; St. Barnabas Episcopal Church, Arroyo Grande, CA

"And who exactly is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was traveling from Washington D.C. to Philadelphia. He was car-jacked by several persons, who stole his clothes, seized his smartphone, broke his ribs, cracked his skull, leaving him unconscious on the side of the road. Now it happened to be the time of a great conference and a pro-life group was passing by, and when they saw the man, they passed on by. Likewise, a missionary group who just returned from India, when they came to the exact same location, they too passed on to the other side.

But a Muslim, with a heavy beard and fierce eyes, saw the man on the side of the road as he traveled to work. And when he saw him, he entered into his suffering. He pulled out his first aid kit, tended to the man's injuries and then called 911 for emergency assistance. He followed the ambulance to the hospital and sat over night with the man in ICU. The next morning, he told the hospital billing office, "Here is my credit card. Take care of him and whatever he needs." Jesus asked, "Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man carjacked?" "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said: "You go and do the same." (story by Jared Wilson)

Mercy. A little bit of mercy makes the world less cold and more just! (Pope Francis) The Greek word translated as *mercy* in today's gospel is *eleos*, which can also be translated as *pity* or *compassion* or *kindness*. Unfortunately, compassion is in short supply today in a society that is in a world of hurt; one that is driven by competition, greed, individualism, prejudice, violence, and a thirst for power.

So, if you have ever asked yourself, "What can I do to make a difference in this world?" or "What can I do to alleviate the pain of others?" or "What does the future hold for all of us?" or "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"...then the story of the good Samaritan is written for you. If you ever wondered "is everything going to be O.K." or "is there hope for the future" then this sermon is being addressed to you.

We all know the story of the Good Samaritan by heart. I don't need to moralize about how we should show each other more compassion and mercy. I don't need to tell you how prejudice, greed and fear limit people's willingness to address gun violence, poverty, and immigration reform. However, I do know that in our personal and communal lives, our table is just too small; that we often reach out only to our close families and friends, while the whole world is crying out. Today's gospel is all about breaking down those barriers, standing beside one another in times of suffering, and expanding those we invite to our table.

Fear is the dominant factor that limits our compassion. How do we break down those barriers that keep us from shouldering one another's burdens when we are afraid? We are afraid of strangers coming into our neighborhoods, messing up our sense of security. We are afraid of people of color causing violence in the streets. We are afraid of immigrants who might commit crimes, when all they really want is a better life. We are afraid of the poor depleting the safety net and raising our tax burden. We are afraid of generously helping others because they may take advantage of us. We are afraid of getting hurt by taking risks. So how do we move from this place of fear to a place of compassion and mercy? How do we make the long journey from *me, myself, and I* to standing beside one another with a helping hand, alleviating those who are suffering? Well let's start out by putting ourselves in the ditch with the man who was robbed in today's gospel.

I want you to imagine taking a trip to Disneyland for a high-school reunion. You hit some heavy traffic along Highway 5 and need to take a bathroom break before reaching your destination. You stop at some exit, looking for a restroom that is open to the public, late in the evening. Finally, you see a possibility at a strip mall. You park the car and begin to get out. But unfortunately, a gang of young men surround your car and steal your wallet. And just as you think the torment is over, they begin beating the crap out you.

Robbed, insulted, bloodied, and beaten, you are left in a dark parking lot. Blood is pouring from your mouth from internal injuries. As you run your tongue around your lips to clear out your airway, you can feel the rawness of your front gums because your teeth have been knocked out. You have difficulty breathing because your ribs have been kicked in. You can barely see people pass by because one eye is swollen shut.

As you lay on the cold, dark pavement, what do you hope for? Who do you hope will come and save you? Is there any person that you would refuse help from? Do you wish that the people who are now passing by you because of fear of getting involved would change their mind? Do you wish that people who are rushing out of the store would take a moment to glance up and notice you lying on the ground bleeding? Would you refuse the help of a man imprinted with tattoos all over his arms and face? Do you wish that an undocumented family would take a chance to call 911 and stay with you, risking an arrest from the police for illegally entering the country? Is there anyone in this world that you would refuse help from and rather die instead? My hunch is, *no!*

One of the ways we can move away from a place of fear to a place of compassion and action, is to sit in the ditch and enter into another person's suffering like in today's gospel. A second way is to witness other people's acts of mercy and kindness. On my Facebook feed are videos of all kinds of people who are willing to take the time and the

financial responsibility to respond to abandoned dogs who are left tied to a pole or a litter of puppies who are dumped in the woods. Perhaps it is easier to have compassion for suffering animals because they are often more loving and appreciative than people.

Recently, I read a story about Lenie Ford who was in the worst pain of her life when she arrived at her local pharmacy. It was June 4th when she reached the CVS pharmacy and discovered she didn't have the piece of paper from the emergency room indicating that she was temporarily covered for the medication to treat her tooth infection. She said: "I only had about 4 bucks on me. I simply broke down and cried. I was literally in the worst pain. I could not form a thought."

It was then that an incredibly warm pharmacist entered into Lenie's suffering and said to her with much kindness, "I'll cover it." Pharmacy technician Verena Harris then reached over the counter and swiped her own personal credit card and paid in full for the antibiotics. Ms. Harris, who has worked at the pharmacy for 12 years, was asked whether she had done this sort of thing before. She looked around the room with a wise, knowing look, and nodded her head. "Yea. Some people just need help and I can't watch someone in pain like that" and not respond.

Contrast this to a story recently published in the NY Times. A 911 dispatcher has been charged with involuntary manslaughter after he failed to send an ambulance to a woman in rural Pennsylvania who was bleeding and incoherent. Ms. Titchenell (her daughter) called 911 from a distance, pleading for help for her mother. She told the dispatcher that her mother was "really bad," hadn't been out of bed in three days, had been drinking heavily, was "turning yellow," had lost "so much weight" and was "making noises" on the phone. The dispatcher asked Ms. Titchenell if her mother was willing to go the hospital. Unable to speak for herself, the daughter answered for her mother: "She's going, or she's going to die." The dispatcher then said, "We can't force her to go in an ambulance."

The dispatcher then ended the call to Ms. Titchenell and told her to call back once she arrived at her mother's house. When she got to her mother's house, she found her mother outside and naked. Unfortunately, there was no cell service. The mother who was 54, who was jaundiced and bleeding from a hole in her esophagus, died at the house the next day, without an ambulance ever being sent. The daughter is left wondering... "Is she not good enough to receive the same treatment as anyone else?"

Who are the ones in our sphere of influence who are not worthy of our mercy and compassion? Who are the ones in our society today who are not good enough to receive treatment? Are they the chronically ill who are constantly calling 911 for one problem or another? Are they the homeless who are unwilling to help themselves? Maybe it's the annoying elderly neighbor who is forever asking for something. Maybe

it's the urban poor who fail to pay for health insurance. Perhaps it is the families at the border who are trying to escape from the violence in Central America in order to save their daughters from being gang raped or their sons from being forced into the drug trade.

So, if you are hoping that everything will be O.K., if you are praying for those who suffer, if you long for a different world where compassion, kindness, mercy, and generosity are the operating principles, if you are working for peace, justice, and the dignity of every human being, then *thank you*. You are the ones to whom Jesus has handed over the baton. You are the ones willing to see the heavy weight on another and care enough about that person to want to do something about it. You are the ones who have taken your baptismal vows to heart, "to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself." You are the light of the world. Keep on shining your light in the darkness!

I would like to end this sermon with a song called, *Stand By Me*. The words are: "No matter who you are. No matter where you go in life. You're going to need somebody to stand by you. No matter how much money you got. No matter how many friends you got. You're going to need somebody to stand by you." So, as you listen to this song, pray for the grace to overcome your fears and strengthen your compassion.