

Too Close for Comfort

July 10, 2016

There's a pastor in the UCC, a fellow by the name of Rev. Mike Piazza. If there's such a thing as a rock star pastor, this is it. For decades, he was the pastor of The Cathedral of Hope which is the second largest UCC church in the country, second only to Trinity UCC down in Chicago. It's a huge church, it's a really, really wonderful community, too. It's a really interesting blend of that southern mega-church experience, gay fabulousness, and UCC justice. It's just absolutely wonderful.

Because Mike grew this church – Mike and his colleagues grew this church – so rapidly and so sustainably, he has been on several different seminary staffs teaching about church growth and redevelopment. One of the things that he, as well as other church growth experts, have been noticing in their research is that since the 1950s – really in the entire era since World War II – the churches that have been growing exponentially are the churches that are also most homogenous: the churches where people think alike, vote alike, have similar economic levels and education. The research says that people are self selecting to be a part of communities that look just like them.

I think that that's a very interesting phenomenon as we continue our conversation about how this church is called to be church in the coming years and coming decades. I think the Holy Spirit always does wonderful things, so it's fortuitous that the lectionary assigned us to read this Gospel today as we're talking about what kind of a church we want to be in the coming years and decades. It's fortuitous because this Gospel we call the story of the Good Samaritan doesn't allow us to be a homogenized church. This Gospel doesn't allow us to congregate and gather only with people who look and think and vote and live where we do.

When we look at this Gospel, we realize that Jesus doesn't allow us to live in silos. The lawyer asks Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" And Jesus says, "What does the law say?"

(Whenever I read this passage, I'm reminded of that quote from Woody Allen where he says, "Why do rabbis always answer questions with questions?" And the rabbi says, "Why shouldn't the rabbi answer questions with questions?")

Jesus asks, "What does the law say?" And what the lawyer does is he kind of scotch-tape together two different quotes, one from Leviticus and one from Deuteronomy where we read that what the Lord requires of us is that we love God with our whole heart, all of our mind, all of our strength. That's one. And the other is to love our neighbor as ourselves. That is what we are called to do. He doesn't say that we are supposed to say certain things or believe certain things. He says that we're supposed to do.

Now, lest you accuse me of my Catholic roots showing, all of you who were taught and maybe even had it drilled into you that we are justified by faith alone, Jesus is the one who says you need to be doing the faith here. If you have a problem with me saying that we actually do need to be doing the faith, take it up with him, okay?

You may have heard it said or preached that the reason that the priest rode on by the person who was in need and the reason that the Levite rode on by the person who was in need was because if

they had gotten off of their horses and touched this bloody body which may have even been dead, that they would have then become ritually unclean. As important and as interesting as that may be, I think it's a misreading of this text, or maybe it's a red herring in this text. I say that for a couple of reasons. First off, Sharon Ringe points out that the text says that they were coming *from* Jerusalem to Jericho. They weren't going to the temple to perform their rituals; they were leaving the temple and therefore their ritual purity wouldn't have been as consequential, they would have been able to cleanse themselves again before they needed to go back to the temple to perform their rituals again. The other reason, which I think is even more important, is that along with requiring ritual purity, the law also requires that you take care of people in need, and that that trumps ritual purity. So as interesting as it is that they would have become unclean had they touched him, that really isn't what Jesus was talking about here.

Jesus starts out using a formulaic story. You know just like we have any number of jokes that would start out, "A lawyer, a doctor and a priest walk into a bar . . .," similarly, Jesus is saying, "a priest walks on by, a Levite walks on by . . ." And now remember, the people who would have been listening to Jesus at this point were mostly peasants. They were mostly people who were disenfranchised by society and so they would have been listening to this story, and they would have expected, then, the third line there to be: ". . . and an ordinary Jew walks in and is the hero of the story."

So when Jesus changes the storyline a little bit, when he says a priest doesn't do the right thing, a Levite doesn't do the right thing, and doesn't say then an ordinary Jew does do the right thing, his listeners get very uncomfortable. His listeners, who were expecting that this was going to be a story about them doing what's right, a story in which the character they identified with was the hero, heard a story instead about people who they didn't like, people who they had been taught to hate being the hero.

If Jesus were writing this in 21st century United States, it might have been an Afghani, or an Iraqi, or maybe even a member of ISIS. People who we have been taught to fear, and to hate, and to discount as not possibly being made in the image and likeness of God. That person is the hero of this story. And so it's intended to stretch our ideas and to make us re-remember that God is a God of all and that each and every one of us is made in the image and likeness of God.

Now this summer, the summer that I have been starting to think of as the summer of terror, that ends up being a really, really important message for us to lift up and remember. Just yesterday I read two different stories that exemplify what Jesus is talking about perfectly. The first is the story of an African American woman who yesterday walked up to a parked police car with her two teenage sons. The policeman was sitting in his car doing paperwork. She walked up to the car and rapped on his window. The officer was frightened, rolled down the window just a couple of inches and she said, "Sir, I just wanted to talk to you about two things. The first is I wanted my sons to encounter a police officer in a non-confrontational way. But the second piece is even more important. Can we pray with you? We have to imagine that it is incredibly hard to be doing your job today." That's someone living the Good Samaritan.

Conversely, the other story that I heard that so poignantly and precisely exhibits what we're talking about here is an African American woman walking into a convenience store in Houston Thursday night shortly after the police shootings. She says that when she walked up to the store, the only people in it were the clerk and a police officer. The two had been talking animatedly,

but when she walked in they stopped. She said that she could feel their eyes on her as she walked up the aisle to grab some Gatorade and a protein bar. As she walked back up to the counter, the police officer asked her, “So, how are you doing tonight?” And she said, “Fine.” And he said, “No, really. How are you doing tonight? It has to be hard tonight, this week.” She says that she was all ready to walk past and just keep her guard up, and then their eyes met. Then she said, “Yeah. This summer has been devastating.” And he asked if he could hug her.

Being human to one another – being human across boundaries, across groups – that is how our world is going to be different. It’s not about policies – those are important and interesting – but the reality is that these one-on-ones are what are going to make a difference. It’s about not walking by when you have that opportunity to elevate someone else’s humanity.

Kate Matthews is the retired dean of Amistad Chapel, the chapel at the UCC headquarters in Cleveland. She asks, “I wonder what happened to the person who was fallen on by robbers once he healed, once his family came to retrieve him from the inn on the Jericho road and he was back in whatever town that he came from. Did he laugh the same way at the Samaritan jokes after that? When people were cruel to the Samaritans who journeyed through their town, did he speak up after that? Was his heart broken open permanently even after his bones had healed?”

I started out reflecting that churches tend to grow when they’re homogenous. We’re going to be talking later on today about how to do church differently and how I believe, and I think many and perhaps even most of you believe, that church is called to be a different kind of place, a place where we all work together on being human to and for one another.

For a long time, church has been understood as this place where we come to receive, to be inspired, to learn, to grow, for our children to learn. But I think that this Gospel text and most of the Gospel texts ask us to turn that on its ear and instead understand church as that place where we come together to figure out how it is that we can make this existence closer to heaven on earth for those in need. That is how we will do what Jesus says. That is how we will achieve life. May we commit ourselves to that, not just today, but everyday. Amen.

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