

Message for August 7, 2022

Luke 10:25-37

Next year will mark the 160th anniversary of the birth of Sir Frederick Treves. In his day Treves was one of the most famous doctors in the entire world, in large part because he was the personal physician for three monarchs, Queen Victoria, Edward the Seventh, and George the Fifth. Indeed Treves is credited with saving the life of King Edward when he became seriously ill. His prominent position as the monarchs' personal physician brought Treves into close and regular contact with many other great people but he never lost his sense of compassion for those less fortunate than himself. That compassion in fact is his claim to fame today.

One day while in London, Treves happened to walk by an old building that displayed a banner advertising what was commonly called a 'freak show'. Being curious, he bought a ticket and went in but what he saw horrified him. Amongst others, he saw John Merrick who is best known to us today as the "Elephant Man" and the principal character of the well-known movie that bears the same name. Merrick's head was as large in circumference as his waist and his face was so deformed that it could show no emotion whatsoever. Merrick's arms and legs were also grossly misshapen. Treves was so moved by Merrick's plight that he promptly made arrangements to rescue him from the sideshow. Treves, who was a renown surgeon, then performed what surgery he could to improve Merrick's appearance and quality of life. After that he made arrangements for Merrick to be cared for, and all of this was done at Treves' own expense. And this is Treves' claim to fame today. He is not remembered for his hobnobbing with royalty, the rich and the famous; rather he is remembered and respected today because of his compassion and care for John Merrick. To put it another way, Treves is remembered and respected today because he quite literally lived out today's scripture passage.

Luke tells us that one day a lawyer sought to trap Jesus by asking him a deceptively simple question: "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus in turn asked the lawyer what he thought and his reply was to quote the words of what we call "The Great Commandment": "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 neighbour as yourself."

Perhaps to his own surprise, the lawyer was told that he was absolutely right, and that if he did these things then he would have life, both now and forevermore in all of its fullness. Despite being told that he was right though, the lawyer was still unhappy. Being more interested in trying to trap Jesus than in learning, he then asked Jesus another question: “Who is my neighbour?” As he so often did, Jesus didn’t answer the question directly but told a story instead, a story that is one of the best known of the entire Bible.

Jesus told a story about a Jewish man who was traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho. On the way he was robbed, beaten, and left for dead. As he lay there, a priest came along but this religious professional didn’t stop to help him. He didn’t because if the man was in fact dead and if he touched him, then he would become ritually unclean and unable to perform his duties in the Temple. A little while later yet another religious professional, a Levite, came along but he didn’t stop to help either. Then a Samaritan arrived. The Jews and Samaritans literally hated one another and were mortal enemies but even so, he stopped. In fact he not only stopped, he even bound the injured man’s wounds, took him to the nearest inn, and then made arrangements for him to be looked after, and all of this was done at his own expense. Jesus ended the story by asking: “Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell among the robbers?” The answer of course was obvious, and Jesus concluded the conversation by telling the lawyer to go and do likewise.

This then is today’s very familiar scripture passage and when we think about it, its message appears to be fairly straightforward. As the people of God and the disciples of Christ, we are called to keep the Great Commandment and love God with all of our capabilities; physical, mental and spiritual. We are also called to love our neighbours as ourselves. And our neighbours are anyone and everyone who needs our help in any way, shape, or form. It doesn’t matter whether they live next door or far away, nor does it matter whether they are near and dear to us or not. Why it doesn’t even matter whether we like them or not! If a person needs our help, then that person is our neighbour and we are obliged to help them as best we can. Truly today’s lesson may not be the easiest to obey but it is certainly easy enough to understand. As I thought about this though, I was struck by one of its assumptions. We are called to love our neighbours just as much as we love ourselves, but I wonder; do we in fact love ourselves?

Some people, and perhaps even most, would say that the answer is a resounding 'yes'. Many people in fact would argue that this is one of the problems facing the world today; that we love ourselves far too much and do not care enough about the needs of others or the world around us. To use an example, most people agree that there is a problem with global warming and that something ought to be done about it. Polls confirm this and yet poll after poll also indicates that most people by far are unwilling to do much, if anything, about it if it means any real sacrifice or inconvenience on their part. And yet while most people believe that people are self-centred and love themselves far too much, not everybody agrees. In fact a number of psychologists and sociologists claim that one of the greatest problems facing us today, both as individuals and as a society, is that too many of us really don't love ourselves or have a high opinion of ourselves. And if this is true, then the question has to be asked; if we do have such a low opinion of ourselves and have so little respect for ourselves, then how can we possibly respect others, never mind love them?

The truth is that if we cannot accept such as the way we look, the things we do, or forgive ourselves when we mess up, then it will be a very real challenge, if not impossible, for us to accept others never mind love them. As the famous philosopher of days gone by, Bertrand Russell, once said, "A man cannot possibly be at peace with others unless he has learned to be at peace with himself."

There is a lot of wisdom in this. Only if we can love ourselves can we obey Jesus' command to love others. But this kind of thinking of course may go against the grain for many of us. I'm sure that we all agree with the idea that we ought to love others, but to say that we must love ourselves first? This sounds so selfish and egotistical! Why this even seems to fly in the face of everything that Jesus ever taught! As Christians we are supposed to be humble and self-denying, not walking around loving ourselves! What we have to realize though is that loving ourselves does not necessarily mean that we are putting ourselves first. To love oneself does not mean that we think that we're better than everyone else or that we deserve better than everyone else either. What love of self does mean is that we accept ourselves for who and what we are, that despite all of our failures and shortcomings we are still God's beloved children for whom Christ came, lived, died and was raised for.

Truly the message and promise of the Gospel is that God loves each and every one of us. This does not of course mean that God always approves of what we say and do but even so, he still loves us. This is the good news and even the great news of the Gospel, and as St. John famously said, “We love because God loved us first”. Truly it is the love of God for each and every one of us that sets us free to live the Great Commandment: “And you shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul, mind and strength. And you shall love your neighbour as yourself.”

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious God, hear us as we come to you in prayer on this summer morning. We thank you for this summer season itself with its heat and long days, even as the days now grow a bit shorter every day. As we give you thanks, we pray for all those who have found the heat and humidity of the past week a burden to be borne rather than something to be enjoyed. We especially pray for those who labour outside, or live or work without access to air conditioning.

We give you thanks for the life-sustaining rain of this past week, even as we pray for all whose fields and orchards are parched. We pray for the people of Kentucky after their massive rainfall and flooding, and we remember too the people of our own and the American West where the devastating forest fires continue to burn. As the world becomes ever warmer and the weather becomes ever more unpredictable, we pray for your creation. Grant that in all we do, we may love it and care for it just as you do.

We give you thanks this morning for all of the special people in our lives, praying for their well-being and safety. We pray this day for healing in the lives of all who are ill, and comfort in the lives of all who grieve.

As the pandemic continues, we pray for the nurses and the other staff in our hospitals as they struggle to provide the care that we all expect. We pray for all the caregivers who feel tired and burned out, buckling under the burden of caring.

We pray this day for the people of Ukraine as the war continues with no end in sight. We pray for the people of Taiwan with the increase in tensions in that part of the world.

We pray this day for your church, both near and far, and we pray as well for all of her members as we strive to be your Son's faithful disciples, fulfilling his word and doing his work. Help us to love you with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength, and help us to love others just as we are most certainly loved by you.

We ask these things in your Son's name. Amen