

Way back when, during a seven week summer session at Camp Grier, at a time when the counselors led all the Bible studies for their campers, there was a summer when the Bible study was on the parables of Jesus. Each day was a different parable, and a different activity was planned for each day – a way to help the campers engage with the scripture other than by simply reading it. Tuesday was the day of the Good Samaritan parable. Each group was to create a skit based on the story and at dinner on Tuesday evening a couple of groups would present their skits for the rest of the camp.

About week five the counselors had seen it all. It was still new for the campers, but it was not new to the counselors. They wondered how it was that children from completely different churches and communities could come up with the exact same skit. One young counselor from Charlotte told me that she was starting to dream about the Good Samaritan. Jesus' old story was taking on a life of its own.

We put ourselves in the story. Who are we this time? Am I the priest or the Levite, both of whom avoid the person in need for reasons completely of their own? Am I the Samaritan who goes out of his way,

even putting himself at risk to help a stranger who is in a bad way? Or am I the one who is in distress, depending upon someone who is merciful to save me?

We have participated in this story at one level or another, and Jesus's story takes on a life of its own in us. I have been in the car with persons who drive past the fellow standing at the intersection holding the cardboard sign asking for help. Whether it is because the preacher is in the car or it is their own inner dialogue coming out, we all have rehearsed that excuse for why we are not going to help. And, sometimes I have heard through the grapevine about the person I know who has done one of those "random acts of kindness", and helped someone in serious distress. When I have tracked down someone like that and spoken well of them and thanked them for their grace in action, without fail the person says they have only done what they would want done for them – the golden rule in action. And sometimes I have known the one who fell ill among strangers, or was hurt or robbed or worse, and they have told how that person who showed mercy was God's messenger in their very worst moment.

Jesus' old story has a life of its own.

And yet, I think this story is in the gospel not just for the encouragement of individuals, though it certainly does that, and it has made more Good Samaritans in this world than we can possibly know. I think this story also is a story about the church. The whole story is about the church – the good, the bad and the ugly.

A case in point comes from the meeting of the General Assembly this last week in Minneapolis. In a relatively short period of time a whole host of important issues is brought before a pretty representative group of church leaders, who with prayer and honest engagement, try to make decisions for the whole church. As it happened a particular interest group of persons was deeply disappointed in an action taken by the assembly. In response to that some people who felt that hurt decided to create a demonstration to disrupt the assembly to draw attention to their pain. Since my seat was on the very front row the peaceful and mostly respectable demonstration was unavoidably before me. In typical priestly and Levitical form, I left and walked back to where I found Anita, who was not allowed down where we commissioners sat. I was a mixture of feelings – anger and impatience, understanding and empathy, unhappiness at this intrusion,

concern that no one be harmed – and so after a few moments of fuming I want back down where I was supposed to be. The demonstration came to a peaceful conclusion.

I think Jesus tells this story to hold up to us a mirror so we can take a good look at what the church is like. If we think we are always going to be like the Good Samaritan – he is very pastorally trying to inform us that we are not. Sometimes the church is going to pass by the one who is over in the ditch in need. Sometimes the church is going to put itself at risk to do something amazingly compassionate and merciful. Sometimes the church is going to look right at the broken one, and look at its demographic and its budget and decide that now is not a good time to be Samaritan like. The story is a mirror for us to look into to see which of these characters we are.

Dorothy Solle, a German Christian theologian and a critic of the modern church, saw over the course of her lifetime, from 1929 to 2003, how the church was often an accomplice in the not very good things going on in a society – in Nazi Germany, in Apartheid South Africa, even in the Civil Rights south – and how sometimes the church was the greatest witness to the call for justice and often in the same place. It has been this

way throughout history, and some have used that as a reason to reject the church.

Another Christian named Daniel Berrigan has said that the world is a stormy place, and the church does its best to launch out into the storm, but sometimes has a hard time doing it. He said that over his life he had experienced the church as like an umbrella – sometimes not very efficient, and sometimes in a hard wind has a hard time keeping people from getting pretty wet, but in going out in the storm, you do not want to be without it. The church is like an umbrella.

At our heart in the church is the one who is at the heart of this story. The Samaritan was one who was rejected and avoided, but in this story that rejected one becomes the one who turns out to be full of mercy. The Samaritan in all our lives, in the life of the church, and thankfully, for the life of the world, is Jesus. Jesus has come into the world and though rejected and hated, he risked himself entirely upon the mercy of God and for the good and health of the whole world. In wine outpoured and in his sustaining presence perpetually promised Jesus nursed our world back into hope and health. Jesus is coming into the world continually through the

church. Though through his death we are redeemed from the power of sin, evidently the residue of sin and its after effects still lingers on – and so we prove to be an imperfect neighbor to the rest of the world.

Yet, the Samaritan presence of Jesus is promised to us and in us and through us. Trusting in him we continually find that his old story has a powerful and lively life of its own and the church, with all its failings and shortcomings, continues to be witness to the powerful goodness of God's mercy, and that, through Jesus Christ, the church proves to be both the one in great need of this most divine neighbor, and also, the neighbor who the world needs, and who Christ continually transforms us to be, so that in us his mercy is shown.

And now to him who is able to do vastly more than all we can ask or think, to him be glory in the church and the world, now and forever. Amen.

Jesus as the ultimate neighbor who is moved to ultimate compassion. He does not accidentally come upon us in our distress he moves into our path and encounters us on purpose so that we may know and receive the compassion of God. This is the compassion that is at the heart of God's creation - a heart that has been lost in our sin - and this is at the heart of God's actions - revealed most beautifully and completely in Jesus of Nazareth.

Brueggemann - compassion is a radical form of action because it announces that the hurt is to be taken seriously, that it is not to be accepted as normal and natural but is abnormal and unacceptable for humankind.

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, he embodies an alternative consciousness - a clear difference from the way the rest of the world goes. The Samaritan expresses a new way that tosses out the old arrangements in which outcasts are just out of luck. The replacing of numbness with compassion - the replacing of apathy with action, fear with love, paralysis with vigor, that is the end of cynical indifference and the beginning of a revolution.

Dorothy Soelle - Struggled with the church because she saw in it the extremes between the power wielding church of Pope Innocent III and the compassionate realization of the church in St Francis of Assisi. It is an unfortunate movement in the life of the church between these two extremes - Oppression and liberation - that has characterized the church over time, and can and often does still characterize much of the life of the church today.

Daniel Barrigan once said the church was an umbrella - that protects us from the cold rain and snow of the world; but sometimes it opens too slowly and we get rained on. Often it is not very efficient. Still, the church is there. And even as we criticize it and become frustrated with it, we could not do without it.

Dorothy Soelle was a child of Germany, and she grew up with family on both sides of the wall - some on the east and some in the west. The church, she felt, often was an inefficient protector and defender of people. Often people were simply left out in the elements and suffered the slings and arrows of the hard world. But, in 1989, she writes, our was proud of our paltry umbrella. After all, she wrote, for the first time in 400 years in Germany, the protestant church stood on the side of the people and saw them through the bloodless revolution that restored the unity of Germany and defeated the oppression of the east German state. .

She wrote that it is a nice picture, a snapshot of the church in its compassionate, merciful, and effective best. She says that time and again I have my difficulties and conflicts with the church - but she said I have not lost sight of this image - of hate, ignorance and ill will on one hand - and openness, readiness to learn, and change on the other. For that, I thank God.