

Bearing Witness, Channeling Sparks

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Stephanie Ford

Sometimes, there is uncanny synchronicity in the way that the lectionary text speaks to life. For what a day, a week, to remember the parable of *The Good Samaritan*? But there is a familiarity problem going on here. We know the story so well that it grazes our ears, and it is easy to pat it on the back and send it on its merry way, without really hearing the penetrating indictment. For the parable is not just a picture in our Sunday School Bible. Heard alongside the last judgment depicted Matthew 25, we squirm in our seats because at that final winnowing of just from unjust, Christ welcomes the righteous using one criteria: those who acted with compassion. "When I was hungry, you gave me food; when I was thirsty, water; a stranger, hospitality." Surely, at the head of the righteous line is the Good Samaritan. For who else is the one left beside the road for dead, but Christ? And who of the three passersby acts as the true neighbor? It's the Samaritan, with no motive of kinship, friendship, or self-interest. The young Jewish lawyer in Luke's story is forced into a corner he cannot avoid: the Samaritan, for whom there are generations of enmity with, gets to be good guy #1!

It is easy to understand why Good Samaritan is probably the best known of Jesus' parables. We have all experienced moments of vulnerability, sickness, dependence—times when we've been desperately alone and without resources...and we know what it is like to have received help—often grace from the most unlikely of sources. My great Aunt Nell was a rather prim and distant woman, even a bit prickly. But she was also a retired nurse. At a family reunion, my eye was painfully swollen and irritated, and she masterfully drained the sty from my eye. From that moment on, my opinion of her was transformed; I was startled into new affection for her. She had become my healer. Imagine the poor injured guy

from our parable waking up in that inn only to learn that a Samaritan had been his savior!

With the deluge of internet videos, Facebook opinions, nonstop news on our TVs and smartphones—our rational and irrational fears are regularly stoked into flame. This past week, the word “chaos” was mentioned by a friend of mine. In the maze of fear, it becomes harder for us look with compassion on the other—though we no longer call him or her, Samaritan. Indeed, we must work at imagining the shock of the word “Samaritan” to the 1st C Jewish ear, but we know what it is like to hate enemies. Spiritual writer Jane Vennard tells the story of a little girl who, several years back, asked her Sunday School teacher if they could pray for Osama Bin Laden. Her teacher was dismayed! I, too, am dismayed at the prospect of sending my good will in prayer to Bashar al-Assad or Wayne LaPierre.

Still, without neglecting the timeliness of our parable’s challenge to our projections of hate and fear of the other—for the Good Samaritan speaks loudly to both—I’d like to turn to three other insights from the parable. The central question I’ve been asking of the parable is what might it say to us, the family of faith called Binkley Church, as a community of healing? One thought I’ve had might be difficult to hear. When we think about Binkley, we feel ourselves to be among friends—and yes, we are—but we also know what it is like to have been at Binkley and felt our souls unseen. Like the one beside the road left for dead, we each know what it is like to have been passed by. *I know that I have missed you.* How could that be otherwise? We are simply human. To be healers of one another in the name of Jesus, to be channels of Divine compassion to one another, means we will always be imperfect and inadequate at the job. But let that not stop us from trying. As the body of Christ to one another, we are called to vulnerability, to listening, to not fixing, to being present to one another. Some say that 12-Step groups have figured this out better than the church

has. And truly, it is easier to put on our Sunday best and save our neediness for a therapist, a best friend, or a paid caregiver.

Spiritual writer Henri Nouwen explains that we are all “wounded healers”; that is, we have each known pain, and we are all carrying around unhealed places within ourselves. But the gift of our very wounds is the awareness that suffering, that not having all the answers, is that we don’t have to be completely whole to be available as a healing friend to another. Perhaps the Samaritan saw the wounded man with greater sympathy than the others because he, too, had been cast aside or because he had known the trauma of violence in his own family. Perhaps he couldn’t avert his eyes like the priest and Levite because he saw himself lying there. The story of the Good Samaritan asks us how we bring our own experience of affliction, pain, dis-ease in compassionate openness to another.

A second thought about the parable as it relates to the healing community that we call Binkley, is the power of bearing witness, of simply being present to another. Healing is not only to be found in the bandaging of wounds or in saying the right words—healing is also to be found in the profound gift of being truly available to another soul. Indeed, sometimes, the greatest healing moment in a person’s life may be discovered in her dying, as theologian Marjorie Suchocki describes in her book on prayer:

At one point my mother, who had been in a semi-coma, roused herself and miraculously lifted her head and upper body from the bed, stretching out her arms toward us, her grown children. My brothers took her arms; I, at the foot of the bed, touched her feet. She looked at me and said a cryptic, “Don’t you want to join me? It’s affirming.” At first I inwardly cringed—to join her in death? No! But I knew she was right. We *had* each joined her, through our deep love and our prayers that so united us with her...Then she looked at us all and said, “My heart is filled with overwhelming love.” I knew that my prayers were answered, and my mother died a healthy woman. There is a health that is deeper than death.¹

¹ *In God’s Presence: Theological Reflections on Prayer* (1996), p. 61.

The parable says that when the Samaritan saw the man, “his heart was filled with pity” and he went over to him. We actually never hear the outcome of the first aid he gave him, or the hours his donkey carried the man, nor the final result of the wounded fellow’s time at the inn. Yet even if the injured man had not recovered—he had already experienced healing. Love, by mere virtue of being offered, is healing.

Finally, although we are not told if the Samaritan prayed or not, we can testify that his actions became a kind of prayer. But the reverse is also true: *prayer is also a kind of action!* Spiritual teacher Evelyn Underhill spoke about the important work of prayer rather bluntly, “This is not mere pious stuff,” she wrote. “[Prayer] is a terribly practical job.” “A real man or woman of prayer should be a live wire, a link between God’s grace and the world that needs it.” Christian mystics speak of the divinity in each one of us, continually being birthed as Christ within us. Meister Eckhart spoke of it as a “divine spark”; Julian of Norwich said that the Divine energy within us is like a substance that cannot be tainted even by our human failings.

Prayer for healing is a lot like touch, the touch of spirit to spirit. Psychologist Piero Ferrucci describes touch near and far as an invisible web not unlike “electrical circuits, neural connections in the brain of mammals, chemical reactions in a cell... and in the ecosystem of the planet, complex reactions in which every element is important.”² However isolated we may feel, Ferrucci contends, we are intimately related to all other beings. Theologically, when we turn with love or even good will to another, friend or foe, we enlarge the channel through which God can work. And miracles take place, often unknown to those involved. Sometimes the divine sparks are felt as warmth, a tingling, or a sudden knowing. Perhaps weeks later, we realize that something has shifted within our bodies, our souls.

I conclude with the words of Jacques Lusseyran, a French resistance fighter, who was among the few who survived Buchenwald. Like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Lusseyran was a kind of soul force for others at the

² *The Power of Kindness*, p. 65.

concentration camp. Yet the divine spark of his life came through suffering. Listen to him describe his response to an accident that cause his blindness at age 7 ½:

It was a great surprise to me to find myself blind, and being blind was not at all as I imagined it. Nor was it as the people around me seemed to think it. They told me that to be blind meant not to see. Yet how was I to believe them when I saw? Now I was aware of a radiance emanating from a place I knew nothing about, a place which might as well have been outside me as within. But radiance was there, or to put it more precisely, light.

Since it was not I who was making the light, it would never leave me. I was only a passageway, a vestibule for this brightness. The seeing eye was in me. Still there were times when the light faded, almost to the point of disappearing. It happened every time I was afraid."

Let us, too, be available as channels for that Divine Light, both here among us at Binkley and in the world we fervently pray for. Amen.