

**New St. James Presbyterian Church  
Fifth Sunday after Pentecost  
Sunday, July 13, 2025**

**“Moved with Pity”  
Luke 10:25-37**

**The Rev. Dr. David Clark**

Our Gospel Lesson this morning is one of the most well-known stories in Scripture, to the point that “good Samaritan” has become shorthand for a passerby who does something helpful for a stranger. Yet “[t]he best-known stories are sometimes the hardest to understand” (Wright), because the moment we *think* we know what a story means is the moment we stop listening—the moment we stop paying attention to the new message God is speaking to us through Scripture.

So to start, a question: where are you in this story? That is, which character are you? By your looks of puzzlement, I’m going to venture that isn’t how you’ve normally read this parable; but to really get this story, we need to climb inside... This story is normally read as an example of loving behaviour, as an example of what compassion looks like. So if we read it that way, where are you in the story? Do you think you’re more like the Samaritan—or more like the two who pass by on the other side?

I don’t think many of us could say with confidence that we act like the Samaritan. Not to say we don’t try to be compassionate, but—with the Samaritan—it’s more than his compassion; it’s also his willingness to take a risk for a stranger, for someone who apparently has no claim on his kindness. And it’s a real risk, especially since travel between cities was notoriously dangerous in the ancient world. Look what the Samaritan does: when he spots the man lying by the side of the road, he could’ve thought, ‘Oh, this is a trap; as soon as I get near him, he’ll jump up and rob me’; he could’ve thought, ‘The muggers are probably still lurking nearby; I gotta get out of here quick.’ Maybe he did think of these risks; and yet, when he sees that broken, bleeding man—he’s moved with pity, and he goes near him, climbs down into the ditch, tends to his wounds, cares for him, and carries him away to safety. This kind of behaviour is rare—and it’s risky. We’ve all heard of stories where someone tried to be like the Good Samaritan, but ended up robbed or wounded or worse.

And clearly, this parable applies to more situations than muggings, right; in our lives, we encounter many people who’ve been left to the roadway—sometimes physically, sometimes spiritually, sometimes emotionally. And I think, most of the time, we’re

most like the Levite and priest who pass by; most of the time, we can come up with 50 reasons why we can't or shouldn't help someone in our life.

Now I think that's how we typically read the story—that if we're anyone in the story, we're most often the two who pass by...though we *try* to be the Samaritan. But maybe that's not all there is to this story... In one of the previous churches I served, there was someone who shared with me how he had wrestled with this story for years. He told me: 'I spent the first half of my adult life working so hard, putting so much pressure on myself to be like the Samaritan—and I tried harder and harder to do it...until it left me totally burned out. Then,' he said, 'then I realized that that's not who I am in this story at all. In the end,' he said, 'I'm not the Samaritan; in the end, I'm the broken man in the ditch; I'm the wounded man by the side of the road.'

Maybe there's more to this story than an example of compassion; maybe this story isn't just demanding that we be like the Samaritan. Imagine that's not who you are in this story; imagine you're not the Levite on your bad days and the Samaritan on your good days; imagine you're the wounded, broken traveller who's been left by the roadside.

It's a little difficult, isn't it, to read it that way—because we like to think of ourselves as the heroes of our own stories; we like to think we're strong, in control, masters of our own fate. But that's not the Christian story; the Christian story is not about us as strong, self-sufficient human beings whom God sends hither and thither to rescue the weak. The Christian story calls us saved, rescued, redeemed—because we are people who need saving, rescue, redemption.

Now if that's us in the ditch, if that's you by the roadside—then who are the ones passing by on the other side? Think of all the false hopes and empty promises that have left you behind over the years... People leave us, families disappoint us, institutions fail us, congregations let us down. To be human means coming face-to-face with our own weakness—and with others' failures when we needed them most...

And yet, in this story—no matter how many disappoint, no matter how many pass by on the other side—there is still one who sees us in our brokenness by the roadside; there is still one who is moved with compassion and comes to bandage our wounds; there is still one who carries us along that empty road to where we may be healed. In this story, there is still one who takes that chance, who takes that personal risk, to save us.

And if that's us in the ditch, then the one climbing down to us is Christ: the only one—the only one—who doesn't disappoint, who doesn't let us down, the one who takes that chance, and comes closer to us than anyone else would. In this story, the

Samaritan is far from home; like the Son of God, descending from heavenly glory into the depths of human suffering, the Samaritan takes that risk for someone else in a far-off land. Yet of course, there's a difference. If that's us in that ditch, and that's Jesus coming close, then something's different here—because Jesus didn't only live in this story, but he also died in this story. When Jesus found us, left by the roadside, he got down into that ditch—and then he took our place.

If we hear this parable with us by the roadside, then the story comes alive in a way that involves us to our core. However, I'm certainly not discounting the way you've normally heard the parable—the way that challenges us to be like the Samaritan. That's an important message that the parable speaks to us...but not by itself; because if that's all we hear, then this story can become burdensome and exhausting, demanding us to be better people than any of us will ever be. If we start there, with the challenge—then there's a good chance we'll end up like that man I mentioned from my previous church, who had become burned out after years of trying to be like the Samaritan.

But what happens if that's not where we start; what happens if don't start by pressuring ourselves to be like the Samaritan in every situation; what happens if we start by recognizing ourselves in this story as that broken human being, in need of help, by the roadside; what happens if we see Christ as the Samaritan, the one coming to us in our helplessness and need when all the false hopes of this world pass us by on the other side... If that's where we start—if that's the message we hear first—then the sheer grace and kindness and compassion of Christ will move us to gratitude, to thankfulness, to awe before such a God as this—who gave up everything to come to our aid.

And then what? Well, how could we not then respond with love? As we read in the New Testament, "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). And that gratitude, that thankfulness, that awe before so gracious a God—that is what moves us and inspires us, what fuels us and propels us, to grow in Christian compassion. This isn't to say we'll all suddenly become like the Samaritan; but could become more like the Samaritan?

If we start with guilt (about the times we're not the Samaritan) or if we start with pressure (about how we should be like the Samaritan), I doubt we'll get very far. Yet if we start with the knowledge that, when we were left by the roadside—then God saw us, and came to us in Christ, and comes alongside us now by the Spirit—binding up our wounds and caring for us; if that's where we start, then we can hear this parable anew, afresh; if that's where we start, then we can hear the challenge of the parable with joyfulness—knowing that, whenever we show compassion, whenever we seek to be more like the Samaritan, then we are simply returning thanks for what Christ first did for us. Amen.