**Sermon – Leave no one at the side of the road**

**Luke 10: 25-37**

**Introduction**

These final few weeks of my time at Newburgh UMC have been spent on Confirmation Retreat and Ceremony, Graduate Celebrations, Mission Trip to Guatemala, camp and most recently our local service project in partnership with SWIRCA and Tri-Cap, Temple and Boonville Main St with Mission Here. Even next month youth ministry continues with our Special Needs youth group, many of which are attending camp in a week.

It has been the perfect amalgam of what makes ministry so life-giving and joyful, as well as incredibly stressful and exhausting. Ministry is a strange and beautiful thing. It’s incredibly fortunate that it’s not only paid church workers that get to participate in it. We know full well from scripture that you are all ministers. The church is you, you are the church. It’s not about how good the last pastor was, or how good the new pastor is going to be. It’s about how faithful you are to the teachings of Jesus, to the call of the Gospel…

…and sometimes our journeys of being disciples of Jesus, our journey as the church…leads us into *terra incognita*, places unknown and undiscovered. Many of our teams this week encountered new things, tasks they had never tackled before, situations that were unforeseen and tensions they’d rather have avoided.

As I finished up my time at Newburgh, I’ve been reflecting on 5 and a half years of ministry. It’s easy when looking back to get caught up on what I would have done differently. But, I’d like to share with you three things that I have learned while serving alongside you. And they are things that I hope will grow to be hallmarks of the ministry here for many years to come, no matter who is the senior pastor or youth pastor or whatever.

1. **Jesus’ ministry is *inclusive* [6 minutes]**

… bringing the freedom of salvation to all and breaking down, or maybe more accurately simply ignoring, human barriers (social, political and religious). He consistently drew people and welcomed people that the religious establishment of the day actively avoided and rejected.

…in Jesus, the outcasts of society have hope. Those long marginalized and kicked to the curb (figuratively and literally) can find him extending a hand, inviting them back into the community of the truly human as objects of dignity and divine affection.

When SINNERS were excluded…from banquets

Jesus included

When GENTILES were excluded…from places of worship

Jesus included

When WOMEN were excluded…from leadership

Jesus included

When the SICK were excluded…from participating in society

Jesus included

Issues of inclusion and exclusion lie at the heart of our society’s most contested social issues. Whether it’s part of the dynamics underlying the racial tensions dividing our cities or our church’s heated discourse on sexuality, we need to deal with the realities of inclusion and exclusion.

In Jesus’s ministry he offered invitations to all without requirements or prohibitions, except for those sinning by exclusion. When he grows angry at the disciples when they shoo children away thinking they don’t belong, when Jesus welcomes the offering of the woman who washed his feet with expensive perfume as his dinner hosts judged her unworthy of being in his presence. When he invites himself to the house of a tax collector and announces that salvation has come, as the crowd mutters about the dangers of associating with sinners. Or when Jesus knelt down and touched a man with a skin disease, deemed unclean and unfit to live a normal life amongst others, and Jesus touched him and healed him. Where others excluded folk because of their age, gender, political alliance, economic or job status, health issues or religious beliefs, Jesus rebuked and demonstrated a different way, an inclusive way forward. The gracious kingdom of God, therefore, eliminates any construction of binaries that seek to divide those created in the image of the divine.

Many suffer from regimes of unjust exclusion on the basis of gender, socio-economics, race, or stigma attached to a mental disorder, sexual orientation or identity. Therefore, we should praise God that Jesus offers hope and commands us to proclaim that social divisions are obliterated in Christ (Gal 3:28; 1 Corinthians 11). There are no outsiders to Jesus’ love, all are welcomed into Christ’s presence.

1. **Parables** **can *threaten our self-understanding* [6 minutes]**

…Jesus’ teachings are sometimes difficult to understand. The disciples often didn’t get it first time, or second time…and we often don’t get it. Parables are familiar to many people, but not always correctly understood. They have a way of peeling open to us over time. Each layer offering new insight and fresh convictions. Ultimately drawing us to consider possibilities and points of view we may not naturally entertain…and may in fact find threatening to our current sensibilities. The Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke chapter 10, verse 25-37 is just like that.

[READ passage if it hasn’t already been read]

Parables, when we re-visit them over and over, allow for questions to bubble to the surface, questions that challenge whether we really understand what Jesus’ is saying, and teaching us. In the Parable of the Good Samaritan, the guy who does the right thing…is not the one the society of Jesus’ time would have expected. In the ancient world, relations between Jews and Samaritans were strained. Josephus (a first-century scholar) reports a number of unpleasant events: Samaritans harassing Jewish pilgrims traveling through Samaria between Galilee and Judea, Samaritans scattering human bones in the Jerusalem sanctuary, and Jews in turn burning down Samaritan villages. The very notion of “the good Samaritan” only makes sense in a context in which Samaritans were viewed with suspicion and hostility by Jews in and around Jerusalem.

Likewise, Jesus’ characterization of the religious leaders in this parable isn’t exactly comfortable either. The priest and the Levite do not shed favorable light on those in ministry. This parable like many others draws us to consider some new possibilities. Could it be that an outsider, a Samaritan could behave in such a caring way? Is it possible that people who spend their lives serving in the church could be so uncompassionate? Even callous?

There’s a misconception among many faithful folks that religious convictions, by their very nature, are set in stone. People who change their minds are called flip-floppers or backsliders, accused of bowing to culture and “conforming to the world.” But some of the most recognizable names in the Christian story experienced changes of heart: Paul, Augustine, Martin Luther, and C.S. Lewis.

In my own life, questions and doubts have served as refining fires that keep my faith hot and alive and bubbling where certainty would only freeze it on the spot. Rachel Held Evans describes this recognition as, ‘knowing her faith has a pulse’. I’ve changed my mind about a lot of things—the age of the Earth, the reality of climate change, the value of women in church leadership, and the inclusion of LGBT folk in Christian community. A person of conviction is not one who is unyielding to change, but one whose beliefs evolve based on new information, new movements of the Spirit, new biblical insights and, yes, new friends. Does your faith have a pulse? Are you closed off to what God has yet to teach you through the parables and in scripture as a whole? I want to encourage you not to run away from new understandings because they threaten the *status quo*, how things have always been…welcome the opportunity to keep your faith hot and alive.

1. **Discipleship calls us to *love* [6 minutes]**

…we must fight the temptation to self-congratulate when we serve, the fact is we rarely go far enough. The Good Samaritan didn’t stop helping after one act of compassion.

In verse 33…he was moved with compassion, but he doesn’t stop there…

…he went to him

…he bandaged his wounds

…he tended to them with oil and wine

…he place the wounded man on his donkey

…he took him to an inn

…he took care of him overnight

…he gave the innkeeper 2 days wages

…he planned for the man’s recovery

…he committed to return

…he promised to pay for any additional cost incurred by the innkeeper

I know for a fact that this congregation serves well. I’ve sat on the Mission Team and had an inside view of the work that the Food Pantry and Clothes Closet does, or the Guatemala Pharmacy Project and many trips to help on construction sites, or the UMW Summer feeding program or the multiple other ways you show compassion and love to our community. But, do we stop there?Like the Good Samaritan, we must commit to doing more than addressing the wounds of our community. Like the Good Samaritan, we must commit to changing the very situation of those we wish to aid. We must question our own prejudice, our own assumptions. We must question the limits of “reasonability” we often place on service. We must risk inconvenience. We must engage to and then past the point of our own discomfort.

How often do we find ourselves in a situation where we encounter someone in need…now the nature of that need may well look a lot different than the need the Samaritan encountered on his way from Jerusalem to Jericho…

…it may be a person experiencing homelessness, addiction, abuse, joblessness or debt-due-to-medical bills

…it may be a child whose parents can’t afford childcare, new clothes, preschool or extra help with homework and exams

…it may be an elderly person on a fixed income, hospital visits, trouble maintaining their homes, or making themselves meals and keeping track of medicine

…it may be families experiencing the trauma of being separated for an indefinite amount of time as they seek refuge from violence and poverty in their countries of origin

…it may be those excluded from church leadership or marriage because of sexual orientation

…it may be a student suffering the debilitating symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress, and doing so in silence, not knowing how to access the service they need in order to function through the day

**Conclusion**

The fact is, we exclude others and treat others differently based on categories of our own making and in so doing we often justify our lack of compassion.

Jesus, through many of his teachings and through this parable in particular shows us that he came to usher in a Kingdom, a Way of life, and Way of being in relationship for others that was radically different. His mission consistently dismantled the divisions of the day. It seemed to be integral to the growth of the Kingdom and expansion of the Gospel across time and place.

It is my prayer that as this congregation continues to minister to children, youth, adults, those with special needs, those in need of food or medicine or support as they navigate the loss of a job or a love one, that you ground yourself in the inclusive ministry of Jesus, in the hope of growth rather than the fear of questioning, and ultimately be secure in the truth that following Christ demands that we love others…in ways that open doors to people that some would be happy to leave outside.

Church, our task is simple: leave no one at the side of the road.