

**“The Word is Very Near to You”
The Very Rev. Tracey Lind
Chapel of St. James the Fisherman
Sunday, July 10, 2022
Deuteronomy 30.9-14 - Luke 10.25-37**



Open Carry, Cleveland, Ohio, 2016¹

Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.

These words spoken by Moses according to the Book of Deuteronomy have never sounded so appropriate and timely as they do today. “God’s word is very close to us; it is in our mouths and in our hearts for us to observe.”

Moses spoke these words to the Hebrew people as they were about to enter the land promised to their ancestors. He told them that, after centuries of slavery and oppression and after years of wandering in the wilderness, they would be “abundantly prosperous in all [their] undertakings in this new homeland. He also said that God would delight in their prosperity if they observed God’s commandments and decrees and turned to God with all their heart and soul.

Over the centuries, our spiritual ancestors, the Israelites, did their best to follow God’s commandments, but like us, they sometimes would fail.

It’s hard to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus understood this human dilemma. Thus, he said that we should forgive others as God forgives us, and that we should take the log out of our own eye before we start criticizing others. Jesus also made a clear distinction between how we are to love God and how we are to love our neighbors. We are called to worship, honor and revere God; but we are called to love our neighbor with kindness, respect and mercy.

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Jesus told parables to illustrate the word of God, to diffuse conflicts, and to offer insights that shifted his audience's perspective. He was a storyteller extraordinaire.

The parable of the Good Samaritan, this morning's reading from the Gospel according to Luke, is one of Jesus' simplest and yet most complex parables illustrating the essence of what it means to love God and neighbor. Through a tale that would resonate with a first century Jewish lawyer, Jesus also teaches *who* is one's neighbor.

The parable has several characters: the man who was robbed and beaten on the dangerous road between Jericho and Jerusalem; the robbers who stripped and beat him; the priest and the religious leader who passed by on the other side of the road; the Samaritan who stopped to help; and the innkeeper.

Each of these characters has a teaching role in the story, and each of these characters could be you or me on any given day. In fact, I have been several of those characters more than once in my life.

Many years ago, driving home from the Cape on a busy summer weekend, I witnessed an awful accident on the Mass Pike. A tire bounced out of an open truck crashing through the front window of the car behind it. Traffic came to a halt, and I was close by so I got out of my car to see if I could help. So did a doctor, a nurse, and two EMTs. As they desperately but unsuccessfully worked to resuscitate the driver, I sat with his wife. They had just dropped off their youngest child at college. We both knew her husband was probably dead, and all we could do was wait for the life flight helicopter to arrive. Once they were whisked away and police began to clear the road, I sat with my fellow first responders as we all wept. Life was changed in an instant, but a community of strangers was formed.



Mass Pike, August 2004

Two summers ago, driving the same route on Labor Day Weekend, our brand new brakes gave out. Emily carefully steered our car to a crashing halt in a service lot. A woman yelled at us for taking her parking space; when we explained that we had no brakes, she couldn't stop apologizing and asking how she could help. We were towed to a nearby repair shop, and greeted by a very friendly man who left a holiday picnic to respond to our call. Our brand new brakes had not been properly installed.

The friendly mechanic called in a favor to get the parts he needed on Labor Day morning, hoping to get us back on the road by mid-day. His uncle drove us (and our cat) to a hotel; he told us where to eat dinner and called to make sure we were o.k. The next morning, he picked us up in our repaired car; we dropped him off at his service station; and there were no extra surcharges on our bill. We went on our way very grateful to this Good Samaritan, who by the way, was both a veteran and an ex-convict.

A few days ago, while contemplating my sermon during a swim at Dyer Pond, I remembered those two Mass Pike stories. Coming out of the water, I met a woman who talked about growing up in Wellfleet and riding her bike on Rt. 6. I remarked that it must have been a lot safer back then. She laughed and said, not really, recalling a tire that bounced out of an open truck, almost hitting her and her friends as they were riding their bikes. I responded that I had just been thinking about a similar accident for my upcoming sermon on the Good Samaritan.

Her husband, coming out of the water, said he had just read a Stanford research study about the Good Samaritan.

Social psychologists, John Darley and Daniel Batson, wondered why people help in some situations but not others. They decided to investigate a group of seminary students, randomly assigning 67 seminarians to deliver a sermon on the parable of the Good Samaritan under one of two conditions.

In the *hurried condition*, a research assistant concluded the instructions with "Oh, you're late. They were expecting you a few minutes ago. You'd better get moving."

In the *unhurried condition*, the research assistant ended the instructions with, "It'll be a few minutes before they're ready for you, but you might as well head on over."

Each student walked alone to the building where they would deliver the sermon. On the way, each student encountered a man slumped in a doorway with his eyes closed, coughing and moaning, clearly in distress.

From afar, researchers watched: would the seminary student stop to help the stranger in need?

Darley and Batson found that only 10% of seminary students in the *hurried condition* stopped to help the man. In comparison, 63% of the participants in the *unhurried condition* stopped. In other words, being in a hurry can lead even a seminary student with the Good Samaritan on the mind to ignore a person in distress.²

So one lesson from Jesus' parable might be that reducing time pressure will help most of us notice our surroundings and respond more readily to others in need.

²<https://sparq.stanford.edu/solutions/take-time-be-good-samaritan>

But there's a deeper lesson here. And that is how we relate to people who are really different from ourselves, and perhaps, even sworn enemies, as was the Samaritan who helped an Israelite.

To really appreciate the significance of this parable, one has to understand that the Samaritans lived in an area north of Jerusalem; they were considered half-Jew, half-Gentile as they had inter-married during the Assyrian captivity of the northern kingdom of Israel in the 7th century BCE. In Jesus' time, the Palestinians and Judeans didn't get on with the Samaritans. There was a lot of bias, disdain and distrust between these disparate but related "ethnic" groups. And with that, a lot of assumptions were made — not so different from today.

Many of you knew Bob Walter, a long-time member of The Chapel congregation who died last fall. Bob and I first met when I was the young rector of a progressive, urban parish in Paterson, New Jersey that hosted a men's shelter. Bob came from a conservative, suburban parish, visiting each week to serve food in our shelter. Every Monday evening, Bob would arrive in our parish hall wearing the same athletic jacket and carrying casseroles of hot food. He would meet and greet everybody with compassion and concern. Once in a while, I would find Bob off in a quiet corner of the room in deep conversation and prayer with a resident.

Fast forward thirty years. When I showed up at St. James, Bob was here to greet me. I was stunned. What was a conservative guy like Bob doing in a place like this? Little did I know. Over many summers, I really got to know Bob, and I learned that most of my assumptions were dead-wrong. In his Good Samaritan way, Bob taught me that you can't read a person by the clothes he wears, the community in which he lives, the church he attends, or the politics, theology and worldview, you think he professes.

In this country, there is a great divide; and for most of us, life has become one, big, dangerous road. Watching Wellfleet's Fourth of July parade from the front lawn of our Summer Rectory, I overheard somebody say, "Wouldn't it be awful if there was a mass shooting during this village event?" Little did they know that a mass shooting was taking place at another parade in another small American town.

As I pondered today's parable in light of this week's violent gun tragedy in Highland Park, IL — or last week's in Newark, NJ, the week prior in Harlem, or recent weeks in Philadelphia, Tulsa, Uvalde, Buffalo, Milwaukee and Laguna Woods, CA...the list goes on and on...I thought about all those people running for their lives, some stopping to help and others terrified and running too fast to stop.

How would Jesus respond to all of this? I think our Lord would say "Thoughts and prayers are not enough."



Tamir Rice's Shrine, Cleveland, Ohio, 2016

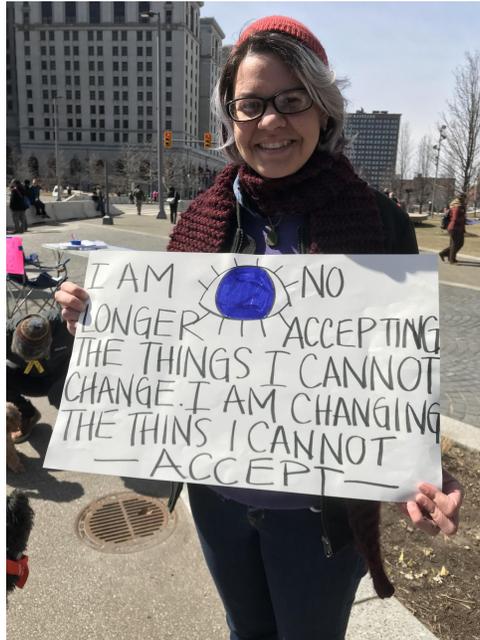
If this morning's parable of the Good Samaritan offers us any insight into Jesus' perspective on gun violence in America, and how we might act, let's consider this concept: people who follow Jesus are called to be inconvenienced. That's at the heart of the story about the Good Samaritan - the willingness to be inconvenienced while we travel on the road of life.

We are called in faith to be inconvenienced when we see someone on the road in need. We are called to be inconvenienced by caring for one another whether we're running late, running for safety or seeking advancement. We're called to be inconvenienced by difficult and honest conversations with relatives, friends, colleagues and neighbors who have a different worldview.

We are called to be inconvenienced by taking the time to get to know those relatives, friends, colleagues and neighbors about whom we have made assumptions. We are called to be inconvenienced and learn more about the root causes of gun violence in America and how they might be remediated. We are called to be inconvenienced by holding elected officials accountable and empowering new leaders who will address the growing violence in our nation.

We are called to be inconvenienced as we embrace *all* our neighbors as siblings and kin, acknowledging that in the words of Martin Luther King, "we may have come here on different ships, but we're in the same boat now." We are called to be inconvenienced as we love God with all our heart, soul and mind, and to challenge ourselves to do the hard work of loving our neighbors as ourselves.

Friends, the word is very near to us; it is in our mouths and in our hearts for us to observe. Let us make haste.



Women's March, Cleveland, Ohio 2018