Transcript – 10 July 2022

Sermon – Peter Parker

Luke 10:25-37

I speak to you now in the name of God, creator, redeemer, and sustainer, Amen.

“Please respond”: it's an innocent looking little phrase found in many business letters, stamped on the outside of envelopes or at the bottom of emails. Sometimes people put it in the subject line of the email: “Please respond:” another version that's perhaps a little more happy with its associations is the RSVP at the bottom of the wedding invitation, *répondez s'il vous plait*, ‘please respond’.

I want to suggest something about that little line, “please respond”; I want to suggest you that “please respond” is one of the saddest comments on the state of human relationships that has ever been made. Someone who is sharing this planet, breathing the same air, drawing from the same planetary pool of life-giving water, whose DNA is so close to mine it's breathtaking, is communicating to me. From some commonly shared concern, this person has written to me or emailed me. Why that request, “please respond”? Because the sad truth is, we human beings have learned not to respond to each other.

Now just to be clear, I'm not including professional fundraisers and scammers who send us way too many emails and letters. The lawyer who questioned Jesus that day was hoping he wouldn't have to respond too much - like any lawyer, he's trying to limit his liabilities. The question, “Who is my neighbour?” begs the other question, “Who is not my neighbour?” Jesus’ parable of the true neighbour - I think that's what it should be called - shifted the discourse from the limiting of response-ability to a definition of neighbour precisely described as the one who was able to respond to *anyone's* need.

One commentator suggests that to understand the impact of that parable, we might imagine Jesus telling the story to the Klu Klux Klan about one of their members crashing his pickup into the ditch and being seriously injured, and being ignored by a fellow Klan member, and ignored by the state police - but being helped out by a black man. *Neighbour* is not to be defined by status or position or race or politics or religion, but simply in terms of a human being's ability to respond to another's need.

In my Campbell River days, I traveled twice monthly to Cortes Island where I led services at a small church there. That involved two ferry trips: you went to Quadra by ferry, then you crossed from Quadra to Cortes by ferry. Of course you came back the other way, and on Sunday nights after the weekend, typically there was a big load from the Cortes ferry and we all had to drive across Quadra island to get the seven o'clock ferry.

One Sunday night I'm driving along in this line of cars from the ferry and ahead of me I see, suddenly, a great cloud of dust rise up from the side other side of the road. I slow down and to my horror there in the ditch is a pickup truck, all crumpled against a telephone pole. It's gone off the road, and you just knew looking at it that people inside would be hurt. Of course I stopped, but you know, I couldn't cross the road, because the traffic going to the ferry kept going past me. They wouldn't even slow down to let me cross. After a minute or two, I was finally joined by a Quadra resident traveling the same direction as the truck, so they went to get ambulance and paramedics.

Apparently, making the ferry connection was more important to those off-islanders than stopping to help what turned out to be a seriously injured passenger.

Elie Wiesel noted in his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, “If there is one word that describes all the woes and threats that exist today, it's indifference. Indifference, to me, is the epitome of evil,” he said.   
“The opposite of love is not hate: it is indifference.” To be indifferent means we are quite comfortable being found in the role of the onlooker or the passerby - you know, all those people that whip out their phones and film the incident. To be a follower of Christ means we will be too uncomfortable to pass by any situation that calls for us to love our neighbour as ourselves.

This ability to respond to another person's need: isn't that the quality that makes us human? isn't that the quality that made Jesus worthy of the title Son of Man, the person who was true to the way God intended a human to be? Gardeners have a phrase about seed produced by certain fruits and flowers -you can plant them and they will grow, but they won't “come true”. Either they won't bloom, or the blossom is a different colour, or there will be no fruit. Jesus “came true” to the divine seed. He was able to respond to the needs of those around. He taught others to do the same. He calls us to respond. We're called to be response-able for one another, even if it is uncomfortable.

Dan Rather, the American newscaster, told this story that happened to him, of an eventful elevator ride in a large Florida hotel. He had arrived late at night, and got up early in the morning to go down to speak to several thousand people. As a well-known celebrity, he was quite weary of always being noticed and addressed everywhere. He realized on the elevator that everyone was staring at him, and got quite annoyed with it. “Don't they know it's rude to stare?” he said. The elevator reached the lobby, and as it emptied a woman gently took hold of his sleeve. “Mr Rather,” she said quietly, “I don't mean to intrude,” - she looked around, making sure no one else was listening – “I don't mean to embarrass you, but your fly is unzipped and a piece of your shirt tail is sticking out.” And then she smiled and walked off.

Not only did she respond, but her response was appropriate. Why? because she appreciated the situation from Mr Rather's point of view. No doubt later on she might have shared the story with her friends or family and had a good giggle, but her response to another human being's need was careful and respectful and supportive.

In the story Jesus told, the traveler from the despised region of Samaria treated the unfortunate Jewish person the same way: he assessed the situation from the wounded man's point of view, he respected him, he neither expected nor asked for a relationship. He knew that was problematic, for him to even hang around him because of the cultural divide, so he set him up in the inn with all the things he needed, and like the woman on the elevator, quietly left.

That wonderful new hymn we sing says, “Will you kiss the leper clean, and do such as this unseen?” As we travel the roads of life, who around us is wounded, pushed aside, neglected, unaware of impending disaster? Who around us has been abused, run down, discarded, thrown into the ditch?

It suddenly occurs to me that the environment on this planet has been thrown into the ditch, and people are walking by doing nothing about it. If we're truly human we will not need to read that line at the bottom of the page, “please respond.” To be human is to become the neighbour, without hesitation, without judgment, without need of reward. We pray for the church as Paul did, “that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will, and all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him as you bear fruit in every good work, and as you grow in the knowledge of God.” To be children of God is not merely achieved by coming to worship. True Christianity is not religiosity, not merely church going, Bible reading, singing songs in the right key - or in the wrong key. True Christianity is always responding to the needs of others, even, and especially, those who would not be our first choice of company. Our gathering here is just the reminding moment, just the nurturing moment, when we discover that we are respected and cared for, that our wounds have been dressed, and we have been set on our way by the greatest and truest neighbour that the human race has ever known.

In the knowledge of Christ's love for u,s we in our turn hear the answer to the lawyer's question: don't ask who is your neighbour and who is not your neighbour. Simply become the neighbour to all.

Amen.