**Homily July 13, 2025**

**St. Andrews**

**The Parable of the Good Samaritan**

Many people wanted to challenge Jesus in his day- to catch him teaching ‘wrong’ theology’.

In our gospel passage this morning, Jesus is put to the test by a lawyer who just so, is hoping to catch him in a mistake. The lawyer asks what must I do to inherit eternal life? Jesus turns the question back to the lawyer—what is written? The lawyer answers- to love God and to love your neighbour as yourself, with all of your heart, mind, soul and strength. Jesus responds- Yes—just do that and you will live.

But the lawyer isn’t satisfied. He persists wanting Jesus to tell him- whom **exactly** he should love. Jesus responds with the parable of the Good Samaritan- which we most likely know by heart. A man sets out to travel the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. He is set upon by robbers and left to die at the side of the road. A priest passes by and looks the other way. A Levite (a first century Jewish holy man) sees him and looks the other way. But then a Samaritan- a man with no obligation to the Jewish people- in fact an enemy- sees him and stops. He **sees** him—and puts him up on his donkey and carries him to an inn and cares for him there. The Samaritan sets out on his journey again the next day but leaves a considerable sum of money with the innkeeper asking him to care for the man until he can check back in on his condition when he returns home.

At the conclusion of telling this story, Jesus asks the lawyer- which of these three people was a neighbour to the man in trouble? The lawyer is quick to answer- the one who showed mercy. Ah yes Jesus says- go and do likewise.

Mercy is the virtue shown to us by God in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Mercy lies at the heart of how we are invited to define love of God, neighbour, and self—show mercy. No guard rails, no exclusions, no ideological limitations on who is our neighbour- go show mercy—wherever we journey.

Why: Because mercy has been shown to us: you and I live constantly in an ocean of Divine mercy.

How important is this message in todays’ gospel? Important. Perhaps we might even say it is the heart of the whole thing for the Body of Christ. Although the parable of the Good Samaritan appears only once in the gospels, we see the same teaching expressed both in the gospel of Matthew and the gospel of Mark.

In Matthew 22:37-40: A lawyer asks Jesus which commandment is the greatest. Jesus quotes from the Torah- from Deuteronomy 6:5 “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind and soul and your neighbour as yourself–on these 2 commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

In Mark 12:28-31: a Scribe asks Jesus which commandment is the most important. Jesus replies as above “Love God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength, and your neighbour as yourself”.

So we see the link between Jesus’ Jewish heritage and history, and our own faith practice: this summary of our faith is found embedded in the Jewish faith from at least 800 hundred years before the life of Jesus. God has been trying to communicate this central meaning and direction to us for a long time! When pop band Earth Wind and Fire released their 1975 hit “All About Love” they were right!

But here’s the thing: the type of love that Earth Wind and Fire sang about- that most singers sing about--romantic love--- is a different type of love from one the Scriptures are talking about. In our culture we tend to reduce any talk of love to notions of romantic love, perhaps extending to the love of our own children and grandchildren….but for the most part Jesus does not concern himself with that kind of love. When Jesus says love God and neighbour as yourself, the Greek word used in the text is AGAPE. Although there are 7 Greek words for love, Agape is understood as the pinnacle of the Greek lexicon, the highest form of love—unconditional, often self-sacrificing love—involving embrace of the other in compassion, generosity, and MERCY---in all circumstances.

This kind of love breaks everything open! The usual boundaries we observe around who’s in and who’s out of our circle of care, our prejudices and hard feelings, our fear and our caution, our anxiety and our apathy—it just breaks open. First our hearts are broken open and then everything else. This AGAPE WAY opens a channel for love to move through and change it all--- change us all. Action leading to healing and reconciliation is the point. In each of these three gospel passages, the word used is ***agapao***—which is the verb form of agape—love is **the action** of unconditional love, care, kindness and mercy.

I have been thinking about what this means for a long time- this immediacy, this inclusivity, this action that agape demands from us—in a world so full of suffering and want.

This past week we were in Vancouver for my son Joshua’s birthday and a conference. While there I met up with a few old friends from my days of living in BC. On Tuesday, I took the number 3 bus downtown to our hotel, from the east side of Vancouver… I had forgotten about the journey that the number 3 bus takes. It transits along Main Street until it reaches the intersection of Main and East Hastings. It then turns left and passes along East Hastings for several blocks. Main and East Hastings is the epicentre of the mental health and addiction crisis in Vancouver. For block after block after block surrounding that intersection there are hundreds- literally hundreds of human beings, many of whom are unhoused, and almost all of whom bear the marks on their bodies of the weight of trauma, addiction, and poverty- sitting, stumbling, lying, and in some cases dying right there on the side of the road. And moving off the main streets-- tent cities fill up parks and parking lots of hundreds more who are suffering.

I experienced this reality for this first time 25 years ago when I moved to Vancouver. And now here it is 25 years later- and the situation is not better. In the wake of COVID and fentanyl it’s arguably worse--even though social service agencies and churches have been working in the neighbourhood for decades trying to change the situation- to fix it. For whatever complex reasons, this mosaic of human suffering-- just carries on from one generation to the next.

If we cannot fix a problem, or find a solution what then? What does this Agape love mean in a world so full of need?

Perhaps on the Agape Way- fixing everything isn’t the point. Perhaps taking the risk of seeing, feeling, and responding with a heart broken open by mercy, as fully and as well as we can-- **is the path. Perhaps the wisdom is that great love begins with small acts of mercy.**

The 4th century Desert Mothers of the Christian tradition taught that the commandment to love God and our neighbours as ourselves lies at the very heart of our work- IS the pathway to realizing our salvation through the God of mercy.

The goal of the disciple’s life, they said, is learning to love—and learning to love takes a lifetime. Our learning journey is not straight forward or easy, they taught. Given the complexity of human brokenness, learning to love in a genuine and self-giving way such as the gospel invites, inevitably summons us to walk through conflict, endure disappointments and betrayals, requires learning both to put the needs of others ahead of our own, AND, in tandem with that, to learn to set appropriate and life giving boundaries, as well as learning to forgive and let go of past harms and hurts. Learning to live the Agape Way **is the work of a lifetime**—a work which begins wherever we are. In every present moment, we are invited to begin again in the work of love which is our birth rite. We may have averted our eyes from our neighbour’s suffering yesterday --but today we are given a new chance to see. We may have failed to act yesterday- but today we are given a new chance to love. Today and in every today which follows-we are given a new chance to love.

As a mantra, we might take the words of 12th century theologian **MEISTER ECKHART who said:** “The most important moment is this one; the most important person is the one in front of you; the most important work is love.” Whoever God puts in our path- there is our neighbour. But this is not only a passive work—we know God comes to us when we suffer-God doesn’t wait for us to come to him. So we know that not only is our neighbour the one who comes to us, **but the one we will take the risk of finding,**

And so, we begin with small acts of mercy- which require us to see the other and allow our own hearts to be so broken open, that the grace of God can move through us to the other: small acts of mercy which teach us about great love--- and in so doing make all the difference.

When I was preparing my sermon for this morning and recalling all the small acts of mercy shared with me on my journey, there were so many I was overwhelmed. Those small acts of mercy at the hands of others who were listening to the Spirit’s call ---saved me by the grace of God. I only have time to share one such moment- and I may even have shared this moment with you before, but it is this story that insists on being told today-- so I’ll share it.

You may recall that my father died of cancer when I was 12. He had been ill for 10 months when he died in the month of September. My brother and I didn’t know he had cancer. We were annoyed that our family vacation plans for the summer had been upended. We didn’t understand that he was dying. But then I was serving at the Sunday Eucharist- the Sunday before he passed. As the intercessions were read, they named my Dad, John Fletcher. And all of a sudden--- I knew he was dying. Grief overwhelmed me and I began to cry. The priest walked towards me. I thought that he was going to gather me in his arms and comfort me. But he didn’t. He spoke quietly in my ear (so as not to disturb the liturgy), “It’s not appropriate to cry in the service. You should go downstairs and collect yourself.”

 I left the service absolutely alone. I took off my server’s robe and went out into the parking to wait for my mom and for the service to end. As I stood there crying, a woman from the congregation whom I did not know well (her name was Laurie Bryden) followed me. Her 17-year-old son Richard had been killed in a bike accident the preceding summer. She came up to me and put her arms around me. She said, “No one should have to cry alone”. And she held me while I sobbed and didn’t leave.

**Small acts of mercy which open the floodgates for great love to move through**. That kind woman saw me in my grief. I didn’t go to her. I barely knew her. She saw me and she came to me. Much as we know God comes to us and never leaves.

May we understand in the very deepest part of us, that in every breath we are held in a Divine ocean of mercy. May our hearts be broken open by the suffering of others, such that we will see, feel, and respond. May our good Lord use us daily, as conduits for small acts of mercy, thus opening pathways for God’s Great Love to redeem the world . Amen