

Sermon: Changing the Act of Acting

Year C, Proper 10

[Amos 7:7-17](#); [Psalm 82](#); [Colossians 1:1-14](#); [Luke 10:25-37](#)

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Today we read the parable of the Good Samaritan. Honestly, we've heard it so many times that we almost can't hear the parable anymore. Maybe there's some nuance about the priest or the Levite we haven't heard before, about how they would become ritually unclean if they touched the man in the ditch. If they were unclean, they would be unable to do their work. Perhaps we can remind ourselves of how good Jews from good families would go miles out of their way to avoid crossing Samaritan territory, because the people who lived there were so very different from regular people.

But in the end, the lesson Jesus wants us to see is the one that the lawyer draws. Who was the man in the ditch's neighbor? The one who showed him mercy. We get it. We want to be the guy with the donkey and the two denarii. We want to salvage this poor beaten, robbed man from the ditch and get him help. We know we can't help the whole world, but we can help this poor guy right in front of us. Indeed we ask the Outreach Committee to pool together all the denarii we can come up with for them and go find some folks for us to help. We want to act. Get the guy on the donkey and get him some medical assistance.

Paul is like that too. He wants to act. He goes all over the eastern Mediterranean. When he's arrested and sentenced to death in Rome, he's got plans to go to Spain and raise money for the church in Jerusalem. Paul is constantly doing: preaching and teaching, plus he supports himself by continuing his work as a craftsman in leather goods. It's not just the churches he's founded that he's concerned with. Today's letter was written to a church in modern day Turkey, founded by the guy Epaphras he mentions. Paul takes his calling as an apostle of Christ Jesus (Col 1:1) very seriously. He understands that call as one of being in action, of personally reinforcing those who have found their way to the gospel and leading those who are still searching. Paul doesn't think about his calling. Paul's whole being is given over to his calling.

So this man of action opens his letter to this little congregation by telling them what he's been up to on their behalf. He has been praying for them, thanking God that they have been doing so well. He has heard that they have been able to harvest the fruits of the Gospel: Faith, love and hope. That is the gospel that Epaphras has preached in their midst and it is the true gospel, which will protect them against false teaching. That gospel is full of knowledge, wisdom and understanding. Paul prays that they continue to grow in the gospel by continued good conduct, by endurance, patience and joy.¹

There are three groups of three: faith, love and hope, knowledge, wisdom and understanding and endurance, patience and joy. And if we asked any nine people about those nine things, we would get more than 81 action steps that we really should take if we wanted more of those in our lives. Yet Paul says take one action: pray. No donkey, no spending a couple of denarii. Pray.

I want to be honest here. Paul is in prison. He can't move about as he wants. But other people may come and go; Timothy appears to be one, Epaphras another. So while you can argue that all

¹ Robert Paul Roth, "Christ and the powers of darkness: lessons from Colossians." *Word & World* 6, no. 3 [1986]: 340.

Paul can do *is* pray, there's an awful lot of activity being generated while he's in detention. Plus Paul himself talks first about prayer. It's only later that he mentions that he's detained.

So why pray? Why not feed the hungry or visit the imprisoned? I think it is because Paul is a man of action. He wants the actions that that congregation at Colossae takes to most fully bring the Gospel into action in this world. Paul wants their hearts to be fully engaged with the Holy Spirit, because then they are more connected to each other and to God. And to him, all those miles away in his prison. Not because he's so special, but because that's the way the Gospel works. The more people who hear the Good News, the more the love of God and the love of neighbor spreads.

Last Sunday, I went into the State Line convenience store, just before noon on July 3rd. They were doing a roaring trade and I wanted to get gallons of water and bags of ice so we could offer some small refreshments at the July 4th parade. You can imagine what it was like, with the parking lot bustling and folks going in and out. So before I went in, I prayed. No words, just a kind of inhale, exhale, remember that God is in every single person there, even if it felt like a roller derby.

I could carry four gallons of water, but not five, so my cunning plan was to push the fifth gallon along the floor to the register, pay for it and then come back in and get it and the bags of ice I had paid for. I haven't even closed the cooler door, when some teenager had been voluntold by his mother to carry that nice lady's water. She was behind me in line and when I mentioned to the cashier the bags of ice, she told her son to go get the ice too. Prayer doesn't make that young man and his mother appear. I'm pretty sure they would have been there anyway. But prayer made me more open to their help, more grateful when it was offered and more ready to do what I could for them. Once I was back in the car, I prayed that they have a lovely and safe July 4th weekend. And we prayed for them today.

Every week we pray in worship. Every week we send home a couple more prayers, usually based on the Scripture readings of the week. Often we add other, special prayers for things that have come up that week. But for many of us, prayer doesn't feel like doing, it feels like some kind of brain exercise. Or maybe it doesn't really feel like it's for us, because we have experience with people who used prayer to tell God (and anyone else who was listening) whom they thought were Good or Bad. There are many reasons why prayer doesn't come naturally to people. Most of us are ok with the Lord's Prayer, but it can get to be like the Parable of the Good Samaritan, repeated so often we have trouble hearing it anew.

So here's a challenge. Take the three sets of three from the introduction to Colossians: faith, love and hope, knowledge, wisdom and understanding and endurance, patience and joy. They're printed in your bulletin. If it feels too weird to ask God to help you find more patience or knowledge or faith in order to take an action you want to take in the world, then ask God to help you see the patience that surrounds you that you've been missing.

Think about the Good Samaritan. He put the injured man on his donkey, no doubt. But how does the story change in nuance or tone if he did it with faith, love or hope? (Pause) with knowledge, wisdom or understanding? (Pause) With endurance, patience or joy? How does the Gospel change the world we live in, when we open our hearts more fully to what the Gospel can do to us and through us to the world? We prime ourselves for action with prayer. And the actions we take change us and the world because we prayed for them to do so first.