



Our Way Forward¹

Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn given for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church

July 14, 2019, Luke 10:25-37

Last week I missed, but later listened to, one of the greatest sermons I've ever heard, by the Rev. Dr. Heidi Joos. If you haven't heard it, I encourage you to go to the St John's website and read it or listen to it. Heidi spoke about the strange world we live in right now—a world of such contrasts they make your head spin. On the one hand, we have families with children pouring across our southern borders, in flight for their lives, being imprisoned for what is not a crime, which is to present oneself at the border as a refugee petitioning for amnesty under international and American law. On the other hand, we have demonstrations of the military might of America, tanks on the Washington Mall and stealth fighter bombers doing fly-overs on the 4th of July at the Lincoln Memorial, where the President hosted a speech and fireworks and a celebration of the freedom our country values. On the one hand, we have people who say that undocumented immigrants greatly burden our society. For example some are concerned that counting undocumented immigrants in next year's census will unfairly skew the distribution of seats in the House of Representatives in favor of states with high populations of undocumented immigrants, like California and Texas and Florida, at the expense of states with low populations of undocumented immigrants like Alabama and Kentucky. On the other hand we have folks who say that every kind of

¹ This phrase comes from an untitled sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Heidi Joos on July 7, 2019, which can be accessed at the website of St. John's Episcopal Church, www.stjohns-mpls.org/worship/sermons/

immigrant, documented or not, immeasurably enrich our nation. For example, some point out that in this country, undocumented immigrants are not eligible for welfare, but they do pay taxes, about \$11.74 billion worth nationwide². In the middle of the arguments and the partisanship, the fact that genuinely good people on all sides of the political spectrum can hardly even speak to each other, children at the border wait in cages without beds or proper care, in the most traumatic thing that can happen to a child, which is to be deprived of their parents after losing everything else they know.

In the midst of all this, Heidi spoke good news to us. She said that we do have a way forward. It is not a way that is owned by the political left or the political right. It is a way with ancient roots, a way that has survived and flourished for millennia. It is the Way of Jesus, in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Way of Jesus is not a guidebook with rules for how to live a good life. I wish it were that simple. It is the endless invitation to follow Jesus, which in the end means loving God with all of our hearts, souls, minds and strength and loving our neighbors as ourselves. The Way of Jesus is about finally coming to terms with what it means to owe our ultimate allegiance, not to any nation or party or ethnicity or any other category of identity, but to God. The Way of Jesus is about learning to see both ourselves and all our neighbors with compassion, instead of as enemies or threats or with disgust or contempt or indifference.

You'd think this were simple enough. In today's story from Luke's gospel, a lawyer asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life, and Jesus turns the question around and asks the lawyer what he reads in the law. The lawyer answers, "You shall love the lord your God with all your heart, your

² See "Undocumented Immigrants' State & Local Tax Contributions," released March 2, 2017, on *Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy*, accessed July 14, 2019 at <https://itep.org/immigration/>

soul, your strength and your mind. You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus tells him that he is correct; if he does this, he will live. But the lawyer can’t just leave it at that. He asks, “Who is my neighbor?” In other words, there must be limits to how much I am supposed to love. Not everyone is a neighbor, right? If I live in Shoreview or Linden Hills, are people in North Minneapolis or Frogtown my neighbor? If I live in Minnesota, are immigrants from Guatemala or Somalia or Laos my neighbor? If the Lakota and Obijwe people are mostly on reservations or in concentrated portions of the city nowadays, are they my neighbor? If I am a Democrat, are tea party folks and NRA advocates my neighbors? Just how much and how many must I love? And what does love look like?

We are not without guidance. Let us start with first things. Our Scriptures tell us that before we ever love neighbors, we are asked first to love God. Not worship, not serve, not obey, but first and foremost, to love. In Deuteronomy where this commandment originally comes from, the Hebrew word for love is **אהב**, achav, which means to desire, to breathe after, to love intimately. There is a saying in Vedantic Yoga which says, “Have the longing for God as if your head were on fire.” In order to love and desire God like this, we have to have the sense of a God who is worthy of that kind of love. That kind of God must be a God of love that is not an abstract idea but a living and personal reality. So at the very least, we need a God who cares about us and our suffering.

Abraham Heschel was one of the greatest Jewish theologians of our time, a man who lost his entire family in the Holocaust. He said that our own desire for justice is a pale echo of God’s desire for justice. He said,

God's concern for justice grows out of [God's] compassion for [humankind]. The prophets do not speak of a divine relationship to an absolute principle or idea, called justice. They are intoxicated with the awareness of God's relationship to. . . all [people]. . . . Justice . . . is not an abstraction, a value. Justice exists in relation to a person, and is something done by a person. An act of injustice is condemned, not because the law is broken, but because a person has been hurt.³

To desire, seek and encounter a God who is intimately familiar with and who cares for each person is what is meant by loving God. It means to seek to encounter a God who is full of overwhelming love for all of us as we actually are in our imperfections and failures and gifts and needs. When we receive the love and compassion of God for ourselves, we are empowered to love and have compassion for our neighbors.

The story of the Good Samaritan shows us what that kind of love looks like. The priest and the levite do see the person who was attacked—who is helpless, injured, left for dead. But they pass by; they do not come close. The priest has too many appointments in his calendar to take the time, the levite is too concerned with purity codes to risk contamination from a dead person—that would make him unable to fulfill his temple duties. But the Samaritan, who himself is part of an oppressed group of people, passes, and the first thing he does that is different, is that he allows himself to be interrupted, and to come near. Once he does come near, and sees the condition of the person lying there, he is moved with compassion. Everything else flows from there.

³ Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets*, at 276, as quoted by Tim Suttle, "Justice is Not Important for Its Own Sake: Abraham Joshua Heschel on Social Justice," in *Patheos / Paperback Theology*, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/paperbacktheology/2014/06/justice-is-not-important-for-its-own-sake-abraham-joshua-heschel-on-social-justice.html>, accessed July 14, 2019.

Our way forward, the Way of Jesus, is about allowing ourselves to be interrupted for the sake of God's purposes in the world, which are always about healing and love. The Way of Jesus is about getting close enough to see our neighbors truly, because God in Christ has already gotten close enough to see us truly. It is about risking vulnerability with each other and the world. It is about not keeping our distance—whether that distance is just about saying what we really think on Facebook from the comfort of our smartphones—or about having an ethical debate far from where the crisis is. It is about real people in real time, and all the actual messiness that entails.

We at St. John's are meant to be a spiritual incubator that gives people the nourishment and healing and purpose that we need to carry these things out into the world, but we aren't going to get these things in the abstract. St. John's must be a demonstration plot for what we want to see happen in the world. We can take turns being giver and receiver, healing and healer, broken and whole, forgiven and forgiving. If we practice in the small things with each other and in our daily lives, we will have the stamina and the wisdom and the connection with God that we need to do this in the big things in the world.

And following this way is not impossible. In the Hebrew scripture reading from today from Deuteronomy, God says to the people, "this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away... the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe." We know what we need. It's right here in front of us. God is with us, the Spirit is within and among us, and we can do this. In today's reading from Colossians, the author says to some of the earliest Christians that their hope in God has borne fruit among them since the day they first heard and comprehended the grace of God.

Comprehending the grace of God gives life, it's what makes us generative, it's what makes this whole Way of Jesus possible. God's grace and love and mercy are unconditional and vaster than the heavens and bigger than the mess we can and do make of ourselves and the world. As followers of the Way of Jesus, we enter into the life, death and resurrection of Jesus in order to make possible what previously had been impossible. As Heidi said last week, "God sees more in you than you do. God has plans and a purpose for you." Theologian N.T. Wright says this: "Strange though it may seem, almost as hard to believe as the resurrection itself—[you are] accomplishing something that will become in due course part of God's new world."

So how do we live into all this, "our way forward" which is the purpose of God, the Way of Jesus to the kingdom of God, part of God's new world?

This week, I'd invite you to sit with today's gospel story of the Good Samaritan, re-read it, pray over it. Then try two things. Try to risk being vulnerable with someone you trust over an issue that is unresolved for you, and allow the love of God to show up through that person for your healing and transformation and wisdom. Then seek an opportunity to come close to someone who is hurting. Don't pass them by. Allow yourself to be interrupted and to suspend judgment and to be moved with compassion. Then ask God for the wisdom and the power to do the next right thing.

Our way forward is the Way of Jesus, the Way that transcends every human difference of politics and race and gender and orientation and ethnicity and nationality and age and power. Our way forward is grounded in the love of God, love of neighbor, in compassion and mercy and justice. Our way forward is made possible through the power of the Holy Spirit. Let us journey together. Amen.