

July 11, 2010
Lectionary 15c
Luke 10:25-37
Pr. Craig M. Mueller

HOW TO BECOME MORE NEEDY

If you're stranded on the side of the road these days, most of us would have a cell phone along. Car problems? Call AAA, if you have their service. On my cell phone I have an app called "Repair Pal." Just a touch away from a rescuer who offers *roadside help*: emergency towing, dead battery, flat tire change, or lockout assistance.

But have you ever been by the side of the road with no option but to wait for someone to come by? Have you ever been beaten up--literally or figuratively--totally dependent on someone willing to help you? Have you had a time when nothing in life mattered but getting assistance? Getting through the dangerous moment? Living past the broken heart, the bruised body, the beaten-down spirit? To be so in need--so needy--that all you can do is hope beyond hope that you will be rescued.

Jesus tells a parable about a man beaten up, robbed, stripped and left half-dead by the side of the road. He is the most needy character in the story.

But you have to wonder about what kind of need the lawyer had. The one who was trying to trick Jesus with his question about inheriting eternal life. The one who was trying to justify himself. The one who was living in his head, in the realm of theory and analysis. Was he arrogant or insecure, or a bit of both?

Sometimes we live in that place. Afraid of commitment, afraid of getting involved, afraid of losing what we hold on to so tightly.

When we pass beggars on the street we struggle as well. Should we give them money? Or should we work to change systems? But one thing is sure. The needs are overwhelming. People living on the streets. People who depend on shelters and food pantries. People plagued with mental illness or addiction. People unemployed or worried they cannot make ends meet. People just tired of fighting. Tired of worrying. Or tired of being needy.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is one of the most well known passages in the gospels. It's entered the common domain. Someone who reaches to help someone is called "a good Samaritan."

But if the point of Jesus' parable was simply to urge us to do acts of mercy to the needy, the third character in the story would have been an ordinary Jew. You would have expected the first two characters to stop and help the needy, beaten-up man. The Levite and the priest were religious professionals. They had needs, too: following the commandments and precepts described in our Deuteronomy reading. Yet they somehow forgot that loving God with heart and soul also meant extending mercy to the alien, the needy one.

But a Samaritan as the hero, the helper, would have blown the minds of the hearers! It was the way they were raised, after all. Sure, we'd call them chauvinists. They would cross to the other side of the road before touching a Samaritan. But are we any different? Who are the folks that repel us?

Imagine yourself in the ditch. Bloody, bruised and hallucinating. So needy you cannot even think. You can barely feel. And the one who stops to help is the last one in the world you'd ever expect: a suicide bomber, a member of Al Qaeda. And that's the one held up in the story. The one who showed mercy.

It keeps happening. Jesus keeps showing us that the kingdom of God always comes us a surprise. Upsetting our assumptions. Challenging our smugness. Enlarging the way we look at life.

We pray for the needy and the poor. In this congregation we reach out to the needy as volunteers work at the Lakeview Shelter and the Lakeview Pantry. Later this month we will welcome strangers to our country, as we provide hospitality and assistance to a refugee family. You'll remember that we gathered household items for a family last summer, yet they never arrived. So we've been reassigned another one this summer.

There are times when people in our community, in our synod, and in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, extend the compassionate mercy of God. But there are also times when we are blind to human need. When we pass by, either overwhelmed by the needs of all the wretched ones crying out for help. Or simply overwhelmed with our own problems.

No one wants to be described as needy. Especially in relationships. To be needy is to be clingy, to have poor boundaries.

But maybe we are the needy ones, too. Part of a suffering, needy humanity. We too are beggars. At the hand of robbers, and sometimes the robbers. All of us with hard lives.

All of us are on the side of the road. As we do each Sunday, pleading and praying: Lord, have mercy. We cry out for mercy for us and for a needy world all too much with us.

And Jesus--the Good Samaritan, the outcast, the Crucified One--pours oil and wine on our wounds. Jesus stoops down to help when there is no other way out. Jesus opens our eyes to see that all of us are part of one neighborhood, one human family. Our neighbors aren't just the ones who live next door. Our neighbors aren't just the ones who look like us, think like us, worship like us. Even our *needy* neighbors have gifts to offer us. Who knows? They just might rescue us from our self-absorption, our busyness, our shallowness.

I admit, it's a strange prayer: Lord, make us more needy. Open our eyes to our neighbors. Have mercy on us all.