

Lent 1 – Luke 10:25-42

At first, I couldn't figure out why our lectionary creators put these two readings together. They have different characters and don't seem to have much in common...there's no obvious way to tie the stories together.

And they're both great stories, so I didn't want to ignore or leave out either of them.

But as I worked with the texts more, what I began to see is that they complement one another as illustrations of the life of faith.

Let's start with the story about Jesus and the lawyer. The lawyer is among the religious folk who are trying to trap Jesus into saying something that will give them ammunition to bring him down. Jesus was seen more and more by people in power as a threat to the status quo.

The lawyer knows the answer to his first question – how do I inherit eternal life? Jesus gets the man to answer it himself...love God and love my neighbor as myself.

OK, says Jesus, then go and do that.

Ah, but who is my neighbor? There's the rub. Surely there is some limit to this love of neighbor. Surely there's someone who's so bad I don't need to love them! Surely God doesn't mean love everyone!

Jesus answers with a parable.

Now, this is probably one of those parables that we've heard so many times we don't even really hear it anymore. To stay engaged, let's try to imagine ourselves as the characters in the story.

We probably hope we can identify most with the Samaritan. But deep down, we wonder if we really can. I suspect as we go through life, at one time or another we've been all of the characters.

For many of us, there have been times when, like the injured man, we're down for the count. Maybe illness, bankruptcy, addiction, grief, epic failure...something has us knocked down. We find that our self-sufficiency can't pull us back up and we are dependent on the mercy of others.

Experiences like that tend to shape our future response to others when they're down for the count.

Next is the priest and the Levite...the supposedly uber religious. They didn't stop to help.

We're not told why they didn't. But here are some thoughts. For one, touching a corpse would render the priest and the Levite ceremonially unclean and not able to perform their duties in the Temple. What if the man was already dead? What would be gained?

Also, it was a dangerous road. What if the man wasn't really injured and it was a trap?

Maybe they were in a hurry to take care of something else really important. Maybe they said, he's not my responsibility. Maybe they didn't really know what to do, so just avoided the situation.

I wish I could say I've never been able to see myself in them. As long as I live I will remember the cold, homeless people I saw daily in that miserable December and January I spent in Chicago when Sam was sick. One man in particular will haunt me forever. Overwhelmed by everything and not sure what I could do, I too walked by.

But for whatever reason, the Samaritan couldn't walk by. He had no particular reason to stop. As a Samaritan, he was despised by the Jewish people. They would have considered him unclean, a heretic, an inferior human being. And Samaritans didn't like the Jews any better than they liked him. Of all three, he should have been the least likely to stop.

But he couldn't. The plight of the injured man captured his heart and wouldn't let go.

I don't know if you've had an experience like that before or not. Probably most of us have...a time when something affected us so much we had to do something. Something like that is happening to me now where racial justice is concerned.

How about you? What keeps popping up in front of you? What has a hold on you and won't let go? That just might be your Samaritan moment.

After he finishes the story, Jesus turns to the lawyer and asked, who was the neighbor? Caught in his own trap, the lawyer knows the answer to this one too. Loving your neighbor is to show mercy...without limits. He answers his own question.

Then says Jesus, go and do likewise.

Go and do...there is a world out there in need of our mercy and compassion. What grabs you and won't let go? What will be your Samaritan moment? Your time to go and do?

Go and do...that's life as a follower of Jesus.

But then we come to Mary and Martha. Martha is busy doing...she is frantically working to serve Jesus. If the life of faith is about service, if it's all go and do, Martha's the one that's got this right.

But Jesus seems to flip things a bit here. Mary gets the credit for sitting at Jesus' feet...listening...learning...reflecting.

Which is the better thing? Acts of mercy, service, and compassion? Or listening, learning, and reflecting?

Well, of course the answer is both. Both are necessary if we are to live authentic lives as followers of Jesus.

The Dead Sea, which isn't really a sea, is a large lake in the Middle East. It's bordered by Israel and Jordan.

It's fed by the Jordan River and by a few underground springs. Unlike other lakes, it has no outlet...there are no rivers that flow out of the Dead Sea.

As rains fall, minerals leach from the rocks in the area and are washed into the river Jordan and into the lake. The most prominent of those minerals form salt.

Since there's no outlet, the only way water leaves the Dead Sea is by evaporation. As the water evaporates, the salt concentration increases. It's 10 times saltier than the ocean. What that means is that with the exception of some weird microbes at its vast depths, there is no life in it. Thus the name...Dead Sea.

With irrigation projects along the Jordan River, the inflow has decreased to the point where the Dead Sea is shrinking.

With no outflow, the Dead Sea is dead to marine life.

With diminishing inflow, it's in danger of disappearing altogether.

It's a metaphor for our two stories...and for the life of faith.

We need inflow. We need times of learning, listening, reflecting, being fed. If all we do is go and do...however important our work is, we will gradually become depleted. We end up sabotaging our work as we get grumpier...we feel we don't get enough credit and get angry and self-righteous when others don't do things the way we think they should be done.

We need inflow to replenish us.

But without outflow...without the go and do part where we follow Jesus and practice mercy, compassion, justice, and service...we're just a vessel that will gradually fill up with a toxic sludge created by our own ego.

We need inflow...we need to sit with Mary at Jesus' feet.

And... we also need outflow...we need to go and do like the Samaritan...and like Martha.

Any time I've been on any kind of mission trip or youth gathering trip, the days are filled with lots of going and doing.

But always, the end of the day brings a time to reflect...a time to look back over the day and ask, where did I see God today? How was God present in those I encountered? We read scripture and pray together.

The purpose of these reflections is to help us connect with God and get recharged to go and do again the next day.

They also help us see that God isn't just present in one or the other...God is present in our prayer and reflection and learning.

But God is also present in the other people we meet when we go and do...and in particular the people most in need of mercy and compassion.

As we listen, learn and reflect on the teachings of Jesus, it becomes harder to walk by the hurting. We maybe can't do everything, but we can respond to the people and issues that simply won't let us go.

Taking time to reflect and connect with God makes us able to recognize our Samaritan moments. Then it gives us the strength and energy to do whatever it is we are called to.

There is a time to go and do...whether it's fighting injustice, binding up the injured and sick, donating supplies to plumbers in Texas, or making a meal for a guest. There is a time to respond to our Samaritan moments.

And there is a time to sit at Jesus' feet and be renewed...to experience Mary moments.

Lent is a perfect time for both.