

SERMON 15TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME 2022

Deuteronomy 30:10-14

Psalm 69

Luke 10:25-37

Introduction

You may have seen in the news on Friday that sadly a woman died in her car in one of the wealthiest suburbs in New Zealand. A woman, believed to be in her 70s, was found dead in her Suzuki Swift that had sat on St Vincent Ave for months and was being used as her home. A resident in the neighbourhood near where the elderly woman parked said her family had made six attempts to get authorities to check on the pensioner but nothing seemed to have happened until yesterday morning when staff from the Auckland City Mission, who had been contacted the previous day, did a welfare check.

A sad story. But unfortunately, not a surprising story. There is a growing sense that something is not right in our society. It is too early to tell what caused this woman to be homeless living in her car in her 70's. But perhaps that's not the point. We have shifted as society to become more individualistic and less community orientated. There are perhaps many reasons for this, but clearly the rise of such things as the internet, smartphones and the subsequent decline of clubs, churches, and community organisations has something to do with it.

On this growing trend American social psychologist Jonathan Haidt says we are in trouble. He sees it on college campuses and through social media. And it's getting worse. Affecting not only our kids, but also our democratic institutions. From an American perspective he writes "Social media is incredibly powerful for tearing things down," Haidt says. "In an ailing democracy like ours where our institutions need to be improved — not ripped apart — it generally has

made things worse." Haidt says we have to wake up, make changes. Or else.

"We have a huge problem. The ship is sinking. We have to stop fighting each other off the deck. We have to start fixing the ship."

As Marcellus observed, "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark."

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But perhaps despite the influence of social media this is not something new. Social media and the decline of community has certainly accelerated this sense of uneasiness in our society but this is unfortunately something that has been happening forever. That woman who died alone in her car despite the interest of her neighbors, was alone. We of course have another story about neighbors today. The parable needs no introduction. It is perhaps one, if not the

most well-known of Jesus' parables. And because it is so well known perhaps, we can forget the scandalous nature of its content. You may well be ware that the Samaritans and Jews did not like each other to put it mildly.

Hatred between Jews and Samaritans was fierce and long-standing. In some ways, it dated back to the days of the patriarchs. Jacob (or Israel) had twelve sons, whose descendants became twelve tribes.

Following the well-known story of Joseph the territory allotted to the tribes of Joseph's two sons, Ephraim ("doubly fruitful") and Manasseh, was the fertile land that eventually became Samaria.

Later, Israel divided into two kingdoms. The northern kingdom, called Israel, established its capital first at Shechem, a revered site in Jewish history, and later at the hilltop city of Samaria.

In 722 B.C. Assyria conquered Israel and took most of its people into captivity. The invaders then brought in

Gentile colonists “from Babylon, Cuthah, Ava, Hamath, and from Sepharvaim” (2 Kin. 17:24) to resettle the land. The foreigners brought with them their pagan idols, which the remaining Jews began to worship alongside the God of Israel, Intermarriages also took place. So, when the Jews returned from exile they despised their northern neighbors as impure. And so it is in this context that Jesus tells this story of the Good Samaritan.

He is not just saying that a neighbor helped a fellow citizen, but in fact what could be considered an enemy. Difficult teaching indeed. But of course, as I spoke about the previous week Jesus uses this type of difficult teaching to jolt us out of complacency and challenge our thinking. In Jesus’ day there were sharp divisions between who was clean or unclean, righteous, or unrighteous. And often this was on ethnic lines. Jesus was establishing something new, the idea that God was beyond national boundaries and ethnic background. The God of Israel was also the God of the Samaritans. He was the God of anyone who

believed that he was the Messiah. This again was something new and radical. And this was to be the power of the new Christian message as it spread to the gentiles and beyond.

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One of the obvious questions from this parable then is who are our Samaritans? I am sure there are many who we find it difficult to relate to or associate with. The parable warns us that they too are our neighbors. But I think there is something else here. Something more profound for our context. That woman who was found dead alone in her car was also a neighbor to someone. And rather ironically her neighbors did in fact try to get her help they said through contacting the council and police. Who it seems in this case let her down as she became just another part of bureaucracy. Perhaps they could have done more.

And here is perhaps my reflection on the two stories this week, the lady who died alone and the Good Samaritan. I feel that we have increasingly as a society become dependent on government and unfortunately the often-cold faced bureaucracy that accompanies it. We have in a sense as a society, and I hate to say it as a church have 'outsourced' our compassion. Every year when I attend the Auckland Diocesan synod, I hear a list of motions that 'call on the government' to do this and that. But unfortunately, it just seems to be a band aid on what is an open wound. The power of the story of the Samaritan is that it was personal. The institutions walked past and left him dying but the compassionate individual stopped and took notice. As we see rising violence in this country, social disconnection, suicide, drug and alcohol abuse, it is clear to me that 'throwing more money' at the problem doesn't seem to be the solution. We need a fundamental change in our society.

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And now here is where I may be accused of wishful thinking. But I whole heartily believe it is faith and tradition which can transform society. For it is not our natural inclination to be compassionate to strangers. But rather sometimes the opposite. But the power of the Gospel is that Jesus shows us what compassion is. He shows us by the way he cared for the sick, the outcast and the neglected. But also the religious leaders the tax collector and the prostitute. He was someone who connected with all parts of society. But more importantly I feel he showed us compassion in his willingness to endure the cross to show us true forgiveness and then to rise again to reveal to us that Death is not the end. As the scripture says, we love God because he first loved us. This tradition of compassion is the very bedrock of the early church, and the church of history. Yes, the Church got many things wrong, however we know of all the many saints who showed compassion because of their faith in the risen Christ and continue to inspire us all.

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As a Church we need to rearticulate this profound but simple message. Now don't get me wrong we do need such things as a basic welfare system to care for the most vulnerable, but we can't just keep increasing this at the rate we are or else all we do is create an ever growing and ever expensive bureaucracy. The Church needs to lead the way in compassion and reemphasize the true principle of self-responsibility. We as a church are responsible for caring for people, neighbors are responsible for caring for people, and families are responsible for caring for people. Individuals are responsible for caring for themselves too. This is what I call organic compassion. But the church will only be effective at this if we can once again connect with our society. And we do that not just by getting on board with the latest social justice trend like everyone else, but rather ironically doing what we do best. Sharing the Gospel with others, worshipping and praying

together, being the people of God. Restoring the sacred in our worship and life so that others might be attracted to it. So that they too may become a part of God's great plan, to bring the Kingdom of God to earth, to transform our society, and ultimately make us all be Good Samaritans.