

True God

Rev. Dr. Scott Ramsey

Psalm 82; Luke 10:25-37
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church
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"To love and serve God, by responding to human need." That is the purpose statement for this congregation – our WHY statement – that we identified a few years ago here at Lewinsville, to clarify why we exist as a congregation, why we're here, and to focus our thinking about what activities and programs we need to be doing and why we're doing them.

When we developed that WHY statement, I don't know that we had our two lectionary texts this morning from Psalm 82 and Luke 10 in mind. But my goodness, we sure could have. Both of these texts resound with the biblical witness that passion for the well-being of the poor and vulnerable is the leading hallmark of the God of Israel and is to be the leading hallmark of the community of faith that gathers around this God. When the church is at our best, that is what we are focusing on.

The secular version of this claim is that the health of any society can be measured by the well-being of its weakest and most vulnerable members, those whom the parable in Matthew 25 identifies as the "least of these" – *the hungry and thirsty* (those who are food insecure and don't know where their next meal is coming from), *the naked* who cannot afford adequate clothing, *the stranger* who is not a credentialed insider in the community, and *the incarcerated prisoner*. How much dignity and attention are these persons given? How much care do they get from us as individuals and families? How much do they get from congregations? How much attention do they get from the government? Psalm 82 and Luke 10 teach us that attention to the most vulnerable is what designates the true God, and is the measure of the fidelity of God's people.

Psalm 82 is set, perhaps strangely for us, in the great heavenly council, where the God of the Bible rebukes and judges other gods that are gathered there. "They have neither knowledge nor understanding, they walk around in darkness," the psalm says. They're not doing what a true God does. The psalmist then says, "You are gods, you children of the Most High, nevertheless you shall die like mortals." What must draw our attention is that this rebuke is not simply a matter of a macho, competitive divinity, trying to one-up each other. God's rebuke of these other beings is *because they have not paid attention to the poor*. "Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked," God tells them. That's their problem. They are acting like political leaders who have been paid off by wealthy benefactors, and whose attention is

thereby drawn away from the needs of the poor in their community. According to Psalm 82, attention to the poor is *the* criteria by which divine beings are to be judged.

Luke 10's parable of the good Samaritan functions in a similar way and unsettles so many of our assumptions about how the world truly works, as parables are designed to do. A primary assumption that gets destabilized by this parable is the assumption – which appears to have been held by the lawyer in the story – that we get to define who our neighbor is, for whom do we have neighborly responsibilities, we should be able to draw lines and borders that will make it clear whom we care for, and whom we can be justified in neglecting. “Wanting to justify himself, the lawyer asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’”

In response, Jesus tells the lawyer a story. And in this story, a man was going down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, where he fell into the hands of robbers who assaulted him and left him half dead, by the side of the road. A priest and a Levite, Jewish religious leaders with whom the lawyer would identify, both pass the wounded man by, and a Samaritan man – with whom the lawyer would absolutely not identify – stops, attends to the man, and takes him to a nearby inn. The Samaritan, we are told, is ‘moved with pity.’ The Greek word that is behind that phrase is one of the most significant Greek words I know. The word is *splangchnizomai*. Not only is *splangchnizomai* fun to say as you spit when you're saying it, but it has a powerful meaning. *Splangchnizomai* means to be seized in your guts over something. This is not aloof, condescending pity that the Samaritan has for the wounded man. This is being seized with passion and care, and a womb-like mother love for the one whose well-being is threatened. Psalm 82 and Luke 10 mean to teach us that God's own guts are seized by the suffering of the needy and the vulnerable and the poor in any society, including our own. Part of our own prayer needs to be, in words that Jim Wallis of the Sojourners community taught a number of years ago: “Lord Jesus, teach my heart to share *your* love for the poor.”

It is my very deep sense that *splangchnizomai* for the poor of the world can provide a north star for the church as we are seeking to find our way through various difficult and contentious issues. What pain in the world seizes us in our guts? How is any given situation affecting the most vulnerable? At Lewinsville, we are called to love and serve God by responding to human need. With regard to the refugee crisis, the question is how can we respond to the very concrete, practical needs of persons who are fleeing for their lives?

With regard to the deeply polarizing issue of abortion, a crucial question is going to be how do our public policies affect those who are in need? Who are those in need, those who are vulnerable? There will be different views about who the vulnerable ones are, and there are going to be different views about how we should respond. We've seen very different reactions to the recent Supreme Court decision. Some have responded with joy and relief, thankful that the well-being of the unborn is being paid attention to. Others, myself included, are distressed and deeply concerned about the

rolling back of these constitutional protections, and the ways that women's freedom and decision-making and control over their own bodies and reproductive care will be restricted and constrained, especially for those who are poor. *Splangchnizomai* and anguish are all over this situation; all of us are feeling seized in our guts, in one way or another. People of good faith in the church land in different places on this, including those who can feel conflicted within themselves about these issues. In our pluralistic society, we're going to have to work together to sort this out for the common good. Psalm 82 and Luke 10 teach us to center all of these discussions on human need, and how the poor and the vulnerable are being impacted. Demonizing others, which is so tempting in a polarized environment, is not likely to get us very far. As with anything, if you would like to get together to talk about this, I would welcome you to reach out.

One initiative that I'm excited about in this regard is an initiative led by our friends at Northern Virginia Hebrew Center in Reston, and their rabbi, Michael Holzman. For several years they have been developing an initiative called "Rebuilding Democracy," which seeks to apply religious practices like prayer, scripture study, and intergenerational interaction to the polarizing and emotional conversations of American political life, cultivating healthy norms of citizenship and productive public discourse. This weekend, Rabbi Holzman reached out to me to invite our congregation to participate, along with several other congregations, which I think could have many benefits for our congregation. Stay tuned for more on that.

The question from our texts, "How are our neighbors who are poor and vulnerable being affected?" is going to be crucial for guiding our thinking on all kinds of things. We can think broadly about that question, rather than just coming up with our own preferred answers to the question.

But the genius of the parable of the good Samaritan is that it does not stop with teaching us to be mindful of the needs of our neighbors. It challenges our very assumptions about who our neighbor is. In Jesus' time, Samaritans were the ethnic other. They were a different ethnic group from Jews, and there was deep mistrust and hostility between Jews and Samaritans. So a priest and a Levite - two religious insiders in the Jewish community - walk by the half-dead man, avoiding him, perhaps on their way to perform their religious duties. When they do, they place their religious duties and beliefs over caring for the wounded one in their path. In the words of Pastor Rob Cheeks from Shiloh Baptist Church, *they missed church on their way to church*. They walked by the real presence of the Lord in the wounded man, on their way to preside over a liturgical offering to the Lord in the worship space. Then along comes a hated Samaritan, who shows tender, neighborly, costly mercy to the wounded man.

The neighbor in this story turns out not to be a friend we should show love to. The neighbor turns out to be an enemy who shows love to us. The parable invites us to imagine ourselves as the man left by the side of the road. We are invited to imagine ourselves as the ones who are in need. No longer are we the privileged ones who are

handing out neighborly kindnesses to others. Now we are the vulnerable ones who are reliant on the neighborly kindnesses of others, including the kindnesses of those whom we despise.

“To love and serve God, by responding to human need.” What need in our world seizes you in your guts, cries out to you from your inner being, summoning you to respond? What is your *splangchnizomai*? Listen to that seizing, my friends. For it is a holy seizing. And let us be aware that those who are very different from us also have a *splangchnizomai*, that our healing is bound up with them, and that the Lord intends to use all of those together for the rebuilding of our world.

To God and to God alone, be all the glory, now and forever. Amen.