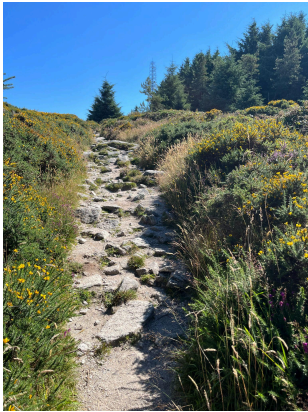


Rev. Dr. Jennifer Hope-Tringali



May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O God, source of all courage and grace. Amen

Beloved Community, this past week has been a very tough week. Natural disasters have struck the world around us both locally and globally. The flooding here in Texas has touched many in our community very personally. The death of children is one of the hardest tragedies to experience no matter when or how it occurs. Many of you have admitted to me that you have found it hard to step away from news reports, both being drawn to the macabre stories, but also in hope of seeing a story of rescue, a story of hope.

While this local tragedy was occurring, Guatemala was experiencing natural disaster as well in the form of earthquakes. Our students at Hope Academy were going about their day in school as usual. We had a volunteer group there from Oklahoma. And mid afternoon one day, the first earthquake hit, and everyone ran outside for safety. The earthquakes kept coming every 30 minutes, and the girls were terrified.

Who is our neighbor? This is the question posed by the lawyer in our gospel reading today, which we know as the "Parable of the Good Samaritan." The story of the Good Samaritan is a familiar story. This phrase "Good Samaritan" has become an everyday phrase in our American culture. In fact, most of our states, including Texas, have Good Samaritan laws to protect people who act in good faith out of consideration for others.

In this story, we heard about this man who was stripped, beaten, and was laying half dead on the side of the road that goes from Jerusalem to Jericho. We heard about a priest, whose duty to save a life would have been much higher than any cleanliness law requirement. Both he and the Levite would have had no excuse to pass by. They saw and they did nothing. In Jesus' time, hearers of this story would expect after hearing about a priest and a Levite, the next "category" down in their society, an Israelite. Here is the first surprise in our story. Rather than hearing about what the Israelite does, we hear instead about a Samaritan, the one stereotyped as an outsider, the other, the despised one.

This Samaritan sees the man and has divine compassion for the man. He goes to him, bandages him, pours wine and oil on him to ease his pain and cleanse his wounds, puts him on his animal, takes him to the inn, and takes care of him in some way, shape, or form until he is well. Though the priest and Levite had the ability to do the same, they did not use what they had, nor act compassionately. They remained focused on self. The Good Samaritan used what he had and did something.

Though the story of the Good Samaritan came after the lawyer asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus instead places emphasis on HOW love is expressed to the neighbor by doing mercy. This is what I saw in the images in front of me this past week. I saw a pastor and her congregation members sitting on the shaking ground in Guatemala embracing terrified children in their arms, crying with them as the earthquakes kept coming. I saw images and heard stories of camp counselors and friends clinging onto each other, while being swept away in the flood. I saw raw mercy being done in the face of tragedy in our world.

When we hear this story of the Good Samaritan, we are often asked to consider which character we most identify with? Are we the priest; are we the Levite; or are we the Samaritan? Today, I ask us to consider instead the character of the man who was stripped, beaten up, and left half dead. Because I think that in some seasons of life, and for many of us right now, we might feel like this battered character who is in desperate need of the Good Samaritan?

These past two weeks, as I re-read this parable from the lens of this being the end of our time together with me as your pastor, and you as the congregation I was called to serve, I reflected a lot on this

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character who was in a very vulnerable place, laying on the side of the road, waiting and hoping for revival and renewal; because, when I came to you, almost two years ago, you needed me, and I needed you.

When I came to you, your spirit was vulnerable and in need of renewal. You needed me to listen to you. Your opinions and heartaches and hardships needed to be heard. You also needed me to listen to your new ideas for ministry. You needed my encouragement, AND often a word of challenge, to find a way to move those ideas forward. You needed me to help you to not see obstacles as blockades, but to guide you to find a way around, over, and through them on the road to God's mission. You needed me to challenge you by creating a culture of openness to try new things (yes, even communion wine); to challenge what has been, as a new future arrives; to challenge you, a group of highly intelligent professionals who strive for excellence and the best product to not fear failure, but instead to redefine failure, because failure is really necessary for forward movement.

When I came to you, your sense of story was waiting to be renewed. I brought you stories from my own life and from Guatemala, and I dug into learning more about your stories from the very beginning when a group of sixteen visioned Christ the King Lutheran Church. You needed me to show you how our stories are all connected to God's story, which is much bigger and broader and dimensional than any of our singular stories. You needed me to remind you how we are freed through Christ to live out God's story through the mission God has called this Beloved Community into, especially to the poor and oppressed.

When I came to you, you needed me to challenge your sense of welcome and inclusion that is declared in your mission statement. We walked together through what it means to be inclusive with communion, what it means to be a community that welcomes those of differing political ideals, and how we welcome those from varied places, and varied identities. You needed the challenge of my family, of my very active and noisy child, and of a family that had responsibilities in different places on Sundays. What does it mean to fully include that energy, that noise, that struggle for parents who may be entering this space solo with their active children to worship God in this space? How do we welcome and value visitors and new members whose experiences have not been Lutheran or maybe even Christian, while maintaining a living tradition?

And, Beloved Christ the King Community, when I came to you, I needed you. When I came to you, I needed you to push me and to challenge me. I needed to learn to adapt my leadership style based on sometimes daily needs of the congregation. My skill in system assessment and evaluation were stretched as I learned what was in place and what was missing, what needed prioritization and what would need to wait. This not only challenged me practically, but also spiritually. I needed to expand my own spiritual practices and grow deeper in my own rootedness to God.

When I came to you, my role in leadership had been previously defined in relation to our Guatemalan ministry Tree 4 Hope. I needed to learn how to relate to new community partners as your senior pastor throughout Houston. I grew in representing Christ the King to Rice University, to Rice Village, CCSC, Interfaith Ministries of Greater Houston, MAM, Spring Branch Independent School District, to Crossing Borders and the Emmaus Center and the list goes on. You are deeply rooted in the broader Houston community, and I was called on often to represent not just you, but Lutherans and sometimes even the broad category of "Christians." This blessed me immensely, and I grew spiritually in this role.

When I came to you, I did not realize that my own sense of mission was indeed limited. I needed your y'all, Beloved Community, though I still cringe just a little when I say it. Your y'all has expanded my own you all to include Texans. and living into God's mission in a Texan culture that can both bring together and divide. Your Y'all brought me the challenge of learning more about my own German heritage, stretching me to learn German so that I could continue long-held traditions. Your y'all brought

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me your Bible studies, your altar guild, your choir, and your lay leadership. You are the heartbeat of Christ the King. I learned to value diversity in a whole new way ...in worship, in weddings, out professionally in the community, and in friendships that I will continue to treasure.

Your story is now changed by me; and my story has been changed by you. Our stories have been woven together on God's loom where a beautiful tapestry will continue to be woven by our Creator. Though our strands may now be physically parting, they cannot be untethered. They remain taut in God's tapestry of life and mission. Our stories are continuing to be woven into God's Church, and we are about to begin the next part of the story, a new pattern in that tapestry.

In our parable of the Good Samaritan, the one needing help and the Good Samaritan were only together for a short time. The Good Samaritan addressed immediate needs, bandaging, tending, and transporting the beaten one to a new place. Their time together was exactly what was needed for both of them to move into their next season of life. And Beloved Christ the King Community, this is where I find inspiration for both of us. You and I are entering new seasons. We are entering them better than we were before. Our gifts are more seasoned; our skills are more refined; our sense of mission is broader and deeper and more dimensional, and our faith more rooted.

And this is good news. And please pay attention to this final piece the Holy Spirit inspired today. because this is what I really want you to remember. As I continued to ponder who IS the one on the side of the road, the one who appears to be half dead, I couldn't help but think about how our Church with a big "C" is perceived in the world around us, the one beaten up, bleeding out, waiting for renewal. We describe her as declining, even dying, and we forget sometimes that God's Church is not just here in worship, not just within our congregational life, but she is out there in the world around us. She is that terrified little girl in Guatemala and those Texan families experiencing deep loss of their children.

Both God's Church, in here, and God's church, out there, need us. Today, I read the "Parable of the Good Samaritan" with a new title, a new emphasis. This is the "Parable of God's Renewing Church." Rather than turning a blind eye to church decline, grabbing what we can for ourselves, and hoping it lasts until we die, it's time for us to be the ones who choose to slow down, to see, to have compassion, to go out to those in our world who are hurting, and to have the courage to commit ourselves to our beaten up Church who desperately needs renewal. This is our calling, to embody Christ for those around us, both inside our church walls and also outside into God's expansive world.

It's ok to be afraid. It's ok to be sad that things are not the way they used to be. We step forward not with our own courage, but with a courage that is rooted in God, in our faith in Jesus Christ, in our trust that the Holy Spirit is already ahead of us, guiding us, pointing the way to God's mission and God's Renewing Church.

Now is the Time for us to part ways

AND

Now is the Time for us to find that new road; the dangerous one; the one that is rugged and hard and a little bit scary. Because along THAT road God's mission is waiting for you and for me. God's Church is waiting to be Renewed.

And though we may no longer be in the same physical space, we will be in mission together, alongside the one who embodied God's mission, humbling himself even to the point of death on a cross.

May we boldly move into the futures God has called us into

May we humbly serve as Christ to each other and to the world around us

May we be empowered by the Holy Spirit to listen, to challenge, to learn,
and to weave, connecting our stories on God's loom of life.

And may we take courage and grace from our Triune God and Renew God's Church! Amen!