Sermon on Pentecost 7 Proper 15 Year C 2019
(Amos 7:7-17; Ps 82; Col 1:1-14; Lk 10:25-37)

Words are strange creatures; they have the superpower of shape-shifting; sometimes becoming, over time, (one thinks of the caterpillar and butterfly) almost the opposite of their original selves.

Take a work like “awful;” at one point, as it suggests, it meant to be filled with awe: a state of being in which one is filled with an awareness of transcendence.

Now it’s most common meaning is something like the opposite: “I feel awful” means not being filled with awe but with a feeling of regret over an action, a sense of deep sadness or just being physically sick.

Take the word “Samaritan.” Originally a person who lived in Samaria, the area occupied by the northern kingdom of Israel after it split from Judah.

Then, after the cataclysm that the northern prophet Amos warns is coming in our first reading, Samaritan comes to refer to the few stragglers who had managed to remain in what had been the northern kingdom and had intermarried with the hated Assyrian conquerors. Thus it became a racial slur, Samaritans aren’t true Israelites they’re traitors and imposters.

Then, the radical re-evaluation by Jesus in the text we read today: people who are capable of loving God and neighbour across traditional boundaries.

And then one final shift, the Oxford English Dictionary notes 1649 as its first occurrence: not only outsiders who rescue people in trouble but anyone who becomes a benefactor within a community is a “good Samaritan.” The journey of the word from caterpillar to butterfly complete.

But as the Lawyer will come to understand; Jesus’ innovative description is not about changing the meaning of a word but about changing the lawyer’s and our hearts!

The lawyer, like most of here today, understands that there is something different about Jesus. To be around Jesus is to be around someone who, at any time, might say things, do things that challenge traditional understandings of God, traditional understandings of what a good Israelite should be and do.

Is it any wonder that Jesus draws from people, back then and today, the deepest of questions?

“What must I do to inherit eternal life?” may be your question as well. Perhaps you have different ones, “How do I live with suffering?” “Is Joy possible in the midst of pain?” “How can I recover from failure or with habits that are threatening my hope?”

“After the momentary pleasures of life, after the responsibilities and duties I’ve said yes to, what else is there?”

Religion is made for moments like these questions! Many in our culture pull out the old saw that religion is an escape from reality when the truth of the matter is the opposite: religion is precisely that spot where we are able to confront those aching moments and questions that all other experiences and disciplines can’t address.

Most of us, like the lawyer, live with provisional answers to our deepest questions. We understand, like he did, that we’ve got to take a stand somewhere. And for most of us that’s here: within the Christian tradition; here is where family custom, tradition, reason and experience have led us.

The lawyer’s life, like ours, is the product of his upbringing and environment. Like most good Anglicans he’s not just following rules slavishly, he’s thought carefully about what’s right at the center of the good life: Love God, Love your neighbour and do both with commitment

And here’s the thing, Jesus appreciates his take on things; he affirms it and in the strongest way possible: “do this and you will indeed inherit eternal life!” Jesus says.

We have to, Jesus knows, think about our lives and come up with boiler plate simplifications that can orient us. Proverbs like “What you do for yourself dies with you but what you do for others and the world is immortal” or the golden rule, “do unto others what you would have them do unto you” can be a wonderful map to help us make important decisions and shape our lives.

And so, boiling down the ultimate, that for which religion is made into “Love God completely and your neighbour as yourself” is helpful and inevitable.

But here’s the rub: boiled down theology and ethics can turn out to be a justification of our lifestyle. When we generalize something *we* decide how and when to apply it!

Now it becomes for the lawyer and for us to decide that helping an elderly person across the street *is* what loving our neighbour as ourselves means or that loving God means paying our taxes and not getting into trouble, while he still holds onto his, and we hold onto *our* hatred and selfishness.

The test of our theology and ethics comes out, Jesus says, not in a tidy saying that *we’ve* defined, but in how we act towards *all* people, not just those whom *we* decide may satisfy our need to feel a bit better about ourselves.

Here Amos’ stern prophecy and Jesus’ point come together: in both cases the religious establishment was promoting a theology and ethic that justified the mistreatment of some by the importance of its work with others.

In Amos’ day small farmers were having their land stripped away; the King’s gleanings were oppressive but they paid for magnificent liturgy and the priests supported this.

In Jesus’ day the poor were being systematically exploited and not supported by the religious and political leadership; they were considered outsiders to God’s grace.

In both cases devastation followed: The Assyrians and the Romans were mop up crews to a society that held to a form of nice sounding sound bytes but were failures when it came to helping *all* people!

The Nobel Prize winning author J. M. Coetzee’s book *Waiting for the Barbarians* is written from the perspective of a judge coming to new awareness of his complicity in the politics of apartheid South Africa.

The novel helps with the shocking realization that large swaths of prejudice are propped by what appears to virtue: “we’re just trying to help those savages fit in” and so we build residential schools and as the project unfolds are as proud as peacocks about how *we’ve* decided to love our neighbour!

What changes for the judge in Coetzee’s novel is his interaction with one girl; he experiences her humanity, her designation as a barbarian is stripped away and he begin to find the courage for the hardest thing we humans do: genuinely change.

Paul mentions this type of change in our second reading when he says that he’s heard a report from a colleague that the Colossians aren’t just having wonderful spiritual experiences; they’re not just learning a lot of information, but they’re becoming a community that is loving across traditional boundaries.

This is the revolution that Jesus inspired. He’s still working by his Spirit and at this Table to get inside our nice little epigrams, our boiled down theology, our little sayings that twinge our minds but don’t actually help us cross the road and help someone in distress.

Here at this table which is no mere generalization but an actual place of particular encounter, Christ is still helping us move from abstract questions like “who is my neighbour” to *being* a neighbour to the one on our way.

And as we do, we may be surprised to find that we’ve stumbled into eternal life!