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St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota  
Sermon for the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost – July 10, 2016

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“The One Who Showed Him Mercy”

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Scripture: Luke 10:25-37

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**[WHILE THE CONGREGATION IS STANDING, SAY...]** *From the 4<sup>th</sup> Chapter of the book of Genesis: “And Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. Then the Lord said to Cain, ‘Where is your brother, Abel?’ And Cain said, ‘I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?’”* **[Please be seated...]**

What a month it has been. Just days ago I returned to be with you again after an extraordinary experience of Christian mission with the people of Holy Cross Anglican School in Belize and some vacation and exploration with family in the Badlands and the Black Hills of South Dakota. Yet throughout these journeys, the times were punctuated with noise and reports of violence, injustice, political turmoil, and fear. More than once our small band of missionaries paused to pray for the peace of the world, for the dead and the grieving, and for our families and for St. Stephen's Church, who we knew would be trying to cope in these increasingly intense times. The wonder and satisfaction of mission and service tempered by the forces that would choose to bring death and destruction to the world. These are hard times to understand, and people are, I believe, rightly distressed, angered, and confused.

But while the ugliness of these times seem new for many of us, they are not new. From the Scripture this morning comes a story 2,000 years old that is completely connected to our times. You see, life in Judea around the year 30 A.D. was a precarious and dangerous enterprise. The Roman Empire had imposed its will upon the Jewish inhabitants of this ancient region, taxing their productivity, encroaching upon their liberties, enslaving those who rebelled, or killing them, bartering tenuous religious accommodations to allow the Jews their Temple, yet all the while demanding their fealty to Caesar. The indigenous leaders were corrupt, self-serving, and beholden to the Empire. And as if it were not enough to be oppressed by outsiders, the Jewish people were factionalized into competing groups, some of whom thought it wise to bow to Rome and survive, others who thought it better to fight and die than to serve the Emperor. You've heard of some of these groups: the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the ascetic community scholars now identify as the Essenes. But we hear very little of the Zealots. The Zealots were those who took up arms against the occupation and their government. They resorted to battle or to murder in order to eliminate their Roman or Greek enemies. And the Romans were often swift to suppress their uprisings, killing members of the Jewish population and crucifying Zealot leaders they could trap. And the conditions were ripe for things to grow much worse. In fact it wouldn't be many years later that a secret society known as the Sicarii would turn to murder not only of the Roman usurpers but of their own Jewish brothers and sisters who refused to take up arms against the Romans or who

collaborated with the Roman government. They incited others to violence, even against their will. They killed in the crowded streets of Jerusalem or other places, stabbing their victims quietly with short daggers, then screaming the alarm, frightening the crowds and slipping off unnoticed in the mayhem and confusion. The society walked the thin edge along the precipice of anarchy, destruction, terror, and death. No one felt safe. There was little time to hope for a better way. Few knew who they could trust. Violence and fear ruled the day.

And some took extraordinary notice of this pending human disaster. Some saw how misguided were the times, how frightened were the people, how dangerous the situation. Some understood how necessary it was to take a different path, to make a return to faithfulness, trust, compassion, and peace. You know I speak of one person in particular who, in the midst of the fear and treachery and violence in his day, told anyone who would listen the story of a man who was beaten, robbed, and left for dead. Not an unusual situation in his time, nor, unfortunately, in our own. And not even the priest would stop and help this broken and bleeding man. Nor the Levite, that professional religious worker who undoubtedly enjoyed some favor within the Temple. Rather a half-breed, despised Samaritan man took it upon himself to help the other. Think of the Samaritan in our times as the immigrant, the refugee, the unwanted, unfaithful, untrustworthy target of the ire of the respectable people. This is the man in the story who Jesus commends. And why? Only because he is the one

who has the common decency to care, the decency to show mercy to another in their time of need.

What I am suggesting to you this morning is that the teachings of Jesus, the teachings of love, compassion, faithfulness, mercy, acceptance, care, and hope, all arose out of times like these in which we increasingly find ourselves. So many of the voices around Jesus were noisy, angry, threatening and afraid, often violent, unreasonable and hateful. Threat of death was a daily companion. Jesus' morning paper and NPR reports were likely similar to our own in political tone and stories of violence and upheaval. And the middle of all that noise, Jesus brought the firm voice of compassion, the healing of the sick, the welcoming of the rejected, the rebuke of the cruel and unjust, the mercy of forgiveness, peacefulness, love of God, and love of each other. Of course Jesus was ignored by many as nothing more than a fool. Others didn't ignore him at all, rather they sought to silence him. But our call is neither to ignore nor to be silent. The times in which we are living are the times that need Jesus' Gospel, and the Gospel is revealed this morning in a simple story of mercy from one person to another.

Lately I've been thinking a lot about the many times in the Bible when an angel appears to someone and says, "Do not be afraid." But I am afraid. How can I not be with the daily indecencies we visit upon one another. How can I not be afraid when

people turn their weapons against one another, when people live in fear of violent death because of the color of their skin or the gender of the one they love or the God they name in their prayers? You bet I'm afraid sometimes, and I am heartbroken, as I gather you are too. But I've come to think differently about the call to not be afraid. I always thought the angel must speak of itself as the cause of fear. "Do not be afraid because of me!" But maybe the angel speaks not of itself, but of the fear people were feeling just because of the times in which they were living. The angels that announced the birth of the Savior did so in times of oppression, corrupt leadership, violence, terror, and a building sense of hopelessness. See, for the Gospel to be good news, it has to come into a world burdened by bad news. "Do not be afraid" is an invitation to those of us who trust in Jesus to rise above the senselessness and anger of these times, to not react with the hatred and fear and violence espoused by others, rather to act with mercy, healing, mutual respect, care, and concern for others... all others. This call has not changed for us from Jesus' day to our own. I'm not telling you I think mercy, healing, mutual respect, care, and concern for others is easy, or that it makes entire sense in the eyes of the world, or that it will prevent others from hating or hurting us. I'm saying it is the way of Jesus, and it is the way of salvation.

It is a blessing to be about the work of ministry in Jesus' name. I know our mission group in Belize was blessed to be helping others in times of crisis. What can we do as people of faith in a world torn by strife? Be about the work of love. Help

people in their time of need. Pray, as Jesus told us to do, for friends and enemies alike. Show compassion to those who are hurting. Don't beat others down. Take some time from making a living to help others live.

I began this morning with that age-old story of death and murder come into the world. And I am weary that, after all these years, human kind has not yet seemed to accept the only life-giving answer. *“And Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. Then the Lord said to Cain, ‘Where is your brother, Abel?’ And Cain said, ‘I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?’”*

By all means, if we want this world to be a better place, then...

Yes, we are indeed our brother's and our sister's keepers. Please, do your best to look out for others, to treat all people with dignity, and to fulfill that purpose or caring for one another.