

Trinity Cathedral Sermon
July 11, 2010 - The Seventh Sunday After Pentecost
The Rev, Nathan LeRud

So...I am actually only a very little bit ashamed to admit that I went to see the new Twilight Movie this past week. With a friend of mine... This is the third one, right? The third of four..."Twilight Eclipse." And, on the whole, I didn't like the third one quite as well as I liked the first two. But...there is a really interesting scene near the climax of the film. Edward Cullen, who is the pale vampire with the sparkly skin, and Jacob Black--the chiseled Native American werewolf--are vying for the love of Bella Swann...a beautiful, but--in my opinion, a kind of boring and mopey high-school senior. (laughter) And the three of them are getting ready for the big blowout vampire battle. And they're up in this tent, up in the mountains, Bella is freezing--she's sleeping, cuddled up against Jacob the werewolf for warmth, because Edward of course, provides no warmth--he's a vampire. But she is engaged to marry Edward. Jacob doesn't know that...this is getting a little ridiculous, I know... But the important thing is that Edward and Jacob are enemies. Because they come from two opposing races: vampires and werewolves are sworn enemies in the world of Twilight. And, because they are rivals for the love of the beautiful Bella Swann. But...Bella is in danger. So, they're putting aside their hatred to protect her, and they have this conversation late at night...while Bella is sleeping there in the tent. And Jacob--the werewolf--asks Edward--the vampire: "If Bella chooses me over you...would you kill me?" And Edward thinks about it for a second, and he says: "No, I wouldn't do anything to hurt her." And then he pauses for a second, and then he says: "You know, if it weren't for the fact that we're natural enemies...and if you weren't trying to steal away my reason for existing...I might actually like you." And Jacob responds by looking deep into Edward's golden vampire eyes...and he says: "You know, if you weren't planning on sucking the life out of the girl that I love, I might..."...and he kind of pauses for a second, and he thinks about it...and then he shakes his head and says "No--not even then." (Laughter)

Vampire and werewolves...right? Edward versus Jacob. This is like the seminal question of the day. They tried to get Elena Kagan to express an opinion on the Edward vs. Jacob question, during her hearings. And she wisely--I think--declined, to express an opinion. So I'm going to take a page out of Elena Kagan's book, and skirt the issue of where my personal loyalties are...you can ask me about it at coffee hour...but, at the risk of being completely ridiculous, I have to admit that I have been thinking alot about vampires and werewolves, this week. We've had all this stuff in the news: suicide bombings in Iraq...Shiites and Sunnis at each others' throats...this centuries-long conflict between two natural enemies. And, closer to home this week, we've had traditionalists and reformers in the Church of England, battling it out over women bishops. And the Archbishop of Canterbury, failing to broker a compromise that probably would have left everyone unsatisfied anyway. You've got vampires and werewolves battling it out on movie screens across the country, and I'm looking at this story of the good Samaritan...this parable of Jesus that has become almost completely co-opted by the larger, sort of cultural, lexicon. It's one of those stories that we all think we know, right? The guy who comes along the road, and sees the beaten man who has been stripped of everything he has, and left by the side of the road. The one who takes pity on his

neighbor after the religious professionals have left him for dead. We all know this story. And I venture to suggest that a few of us might be a little bit bored with it at this point. At least I am.

But I wonder if there's a way, in which turning this story, this parable, of Jesus into a moral...about what it means to be a neighbor...means that we're missing the point, somehow. I wonder if this story isn't less about neighbors, and more about maybe vampires and werewolves. Luke begins the story not with the age-old conflict between Jews and Samaritans--the vampires and werewolves of their day--but, with what I want to call an almost inevitable skirmish--between the rabbi and the lawyer. This is our first set of vampires and werewolves in the story. And I think it is actually where the action is. Jesus has been dogged, throughout his ministry, by religious lawyers, and scribes, and Pharisees. This whole camp of religious professionals who are trying to trip Him up. And here again, the story begins with an attack. "Teacher, what must I do, to inherit eternal life?" the lawyer asks. And he already knows the answer, right? The lawyer asks the question--not just to see if Jesus knows the answer--but in the hopes that Jesus will answer in such a way, that he will be discredited in front of his followers. But Jesus knows he is being set up, and he responds by making the lawyer answer for him. What is written in the law?...What do you find there? And the lawyer, knowing the game is up, answers...begrudgingly..."You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and all your mind, and all your strength, and love your neighbor as yourself."...which is the right answer. And Jesus says: "There you go! You have your answer! Go and do that!

But the lawyer sets out to discredit and humiliate Jesus, and it's him now, who has been discredited and humiliated...so Luke says, he attempts to justify himself...to win back his pride...to save face. "Who is my neighbor?" he asks. And again, this is kind of a trick question. But Jesus responds not with an answer, but with a parable. Which on the surface--at least the way that some of us have grown up reading it--it paints what looks like a pretty tidy little moral picture. A man is beaten. Two bad guys walk on by, but one man stops to help. And at first, it doesn't look like there is a lot of room for interpretation in this particular parable. As if to drive the point home, Jesus gets a little pedantic at the end: "So who do you think did the right thing?" And the answer is pretty obvious. That's a moral reading of this parable. And that's where most of the world is content to leave it, I think. Because for most of us...Jesus the moral teacher, is the Jesus that we are most interested in. Because he's safe, right? He's the safe Jesus. He's the Jesus who parrots back at us, the values that we think are most important: tolerance and compassion, and going the extra mile and being a good person, being a good Samaritan...in the way that we kind of casually use that phrase, right? Being the one who stops to help out a fellow man in need. That's the moral of the story. And Jesus the moralist, is the guy that is easy to love.

So in this way of understanding Jesus, the parables become these little mini Aesop's fables...with clear moral lessons that we can make into a little children's book, with fuzzy animal characters, and we feel good about imparting solid moral values to the next generation. Like "Love you neighbor," and "Do unto others, as you would have them do unto you." And "Brush your teeth," and "Don't hit people." And when you see a man

bleeding on the side of the road, go give him a band-aid, and a big smile, and help him to the hospital, where there are nice doctors and nurses, who will help him feel all better again. Be a good Samaritan!

But putting a tidy little moral lesson on the end of this parable, makes it safe for us, because it puts it away at a distance. And it becomes a lesson--something that we set over there and look at, when we need a reminder about how to behave. In a way, the moral reading of this parable turns it into our neighbor. Right? Which is something out there...something that is next door to me...but not part of me. Not a part of my inner murky realm of emotions and desires and impulses, right? Neighborliness moves us out of the realm of human psychology, and puts Jesus' teaching neatly away on the shelf of good behavior. And I don't know about you, but I'm kinda' tired of good behavior. I'm tired of a religion that is stripped down to a collection of moral platitudes. I'm sick to death of telling people what I do, and having them assume that it means that I'm a good person, who is interested in making other people into good people. To tell you the truth, I'm kinda' tired of this story...and I feel guilty saying that. I'm kinda' tired of the Good Samaritan. I'm tired of being "nice," and living in a world where religion is equated with God's rules for how to be nice. I don't want the Good Samaritan. I want vampires and werewolves!

And the good news is that underneath the little neat, moral surface of this neat little fable about being nice people...there are vampires and werewolves that are waiting to burst out. When we strip this story of its power, and treat it as a fable about neighbors, we're falling right into the trap that the lawyer is in, when he starts questioning Jesus. "Who is my neighbor?," he asks. And we think that Jesus is telling this parable to answer his question, right? "Everyone is your neighbor. Everybody who is hurting." And that's true. But that's not the question that Jesus is answering, I don't think. Jesus actually isn't particularly interested in answering people's questions. It seems to me he is interested in figuring out what's driving the questioner. Because the question that the lawyer asks, "Who is my neighbor?," that's about morals, right? It's about the moral life, and the limits--the ethical limits of human compassion. But in this parable, I think Jesus is saying the Kingdom of God is not about being a neighbor. Neighborliness is a distraction. It's a way of distancing ourselves, from what Jesus is really asking us to look at. Which is hatred, right? And enemies. The question is not "Who is my neighbor?" The question is "Who are my enemies...and why?" "Whom do I hate? And why do I hate them?" And that's the very place that neighborliness keeps us from. Nice people don't have enemies. They have neighbors. But this is a story not about nice people, but about natural enemies. Jews and Samaritans...or vampires and werewolves. People who hate each other. And when Jesus looks the lawyer dead in the eye, and says "Go and do likewise." I feel like that's an implicit challenge. The lawyer is looking to trick Jesus up, and he's looking to do it by catching him in this world of morals and ethics...you know--what does the Law say? But Jesus' parable throws it right back in the face of the lawyer, and says this isn't about ethics, man...it's about you and me. This is about what it means to be enemies.

Whom do we think the Samaritan and the beaten man are in this story? One way of answering that, is to say that it's Jesus and the lawyer. The beaten man left by the side

of the road is desperate, to justify himself. And the one whom he hates,--his natural enemy, who comes along and has compassion on him...he is moved with pity. And "pity" here, is actually a kind of anemic translation of the word that's really being used, which literally refers to the heart being ripped out of the chest, like in human sacrifice. This is a word that comes out of the world of vampires and werewolves. It's something a lot more like the Samaritan saw the one who hated him, and his heart was ripped out of his chest. He binds up his enemies wounds. He pours oil and wine on them. He anoints his enemy. And he puts him on the back of his animal, and walks with him, all the way to the inn. And the beaten man--the enemy--is either so mortified by this, or so far gone, so beaten up...that he has no idea who has done this for him. And here--I'm extrapolating a bit, from the parable--but I think it's fascinating that the wounded man has nothing to say. Because I don't think he gets it. I don't think he is able, or willing, to confront the reality of what has happened, which is that his enemy has saved his life. The one whom he hates...is the one who shows him what love means. And I don't think he is able to come to terms with that. And I can't really blame him. The lawyer calls what the Samaritan does, showing mercy. Which puts the story back into the realm of neighborliness and morality. But I almost see Jesus shaking his head, kinda' sadly, like you don't quite get it, do you? It's not about being a neighbor. It's about who your enemies are. And I, Jesus, am your enemy. And I'm walking with you along the road, because you are hurting, so badly. You are so consumed with hatred, and the healing I am offering you--you are unable to accept. Because of your need to justify yourself.

So whom do you hate? Another way of asking that question...for those of us who find the language of hatred a little strong...or maybe think it doesn't apply to us...Who brings out your need to justify yourself? That's a question that haunts me, and I think it's why I find that scene from Twilight...up in the tents...so compelling. Jacob the werewolf, says to Edward the vampire, "I really get under that ice-cold skin of yours, don't I?" And he's right! And it's kinda' like Jesus and the lawyer, right? "You hate me," he says. And there they are...this werewolf and this vampire, together, late at night in the tent, squaring off, over the sleeping body of the girl they both love. Consumed with hatred for each other. And, in the end...unable, really, to move beyond their hatred...except to make a kind of uneasy truce with each other. To draw a line in the sand, and to agree to be neighbors, rather than friends. They agree to work together. Rather than to work at learning to love each other.

And maybe that's the first step. Right? Because working together, being neighbors, being neighborly, is a lot more productive, and a lot less violent than killing each other. But if it stops with the neighborliness, then I think we're falling short of the Kingdom of God. Being neighborly is, in some ways, the weak way out. Because it retreats to the high moral ground of morals...rather than the harder work of confrontation, and transformation. Being a neighbor, preserves all of the neat boundaries that we set up. Samaritan and Jew,...the one who helps and the one who needs help,...the victim, and the rescuer. And I think Jesus is calling us to something a little more challenging...and probably more transformative...something that gets beyond our niceness and cuts into the place where we are--all of us--vampires, or werewolves. We're being asked in this parable, to confront the way that we make other people into our enemies. Whether that takes the hard form of ethnic hatred, which I imagine most of us probably think that we

are above...maybe, maybe not...or the softer forms that making enemies takes. People who annoy us. People who we think are incompetent, or pretentious, or aggressive, or just wrong. The people that get underneath our skin. The people that drive us crazy. The people that bring out our need to justify ourselves. The people who we would like to keep at the distance of "You are my neighbor, and I am obligated to be nice to you, but I don't have to like you."

And the crux of this parable, I think, is not "Go out and be a neighbor to those people." I think it's something much more like a question that is being thrown back at us, which is what parables actually do. They don't answer our questions. They ask questions of us. And usually questions that we would rather not ask ourselves. Whom do you hate? Who are your enemies? And what would you do, if they came upon you on the road, and their heart was ripped out in compassion, because they saw you as so desperate, so broken, so desperately in need of love. What would you do if you looked up into the face of the person you hated most in the world.....and discovered that that was the face of Jesus.

Amen.