

PNW Annual Conference – Sermon – ‘L’ is for Lay Ministry Enhancement

Bishop Cedrick D. Bridgeforth

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Anytime I come to a scriptural text, I tend to look at a few questions. Where is this happening? What's taking place in here? And I also look at the characters who are involved in the text. Who are the characters?

So as we look at this text here from Luke 10, of course, we know that you know, the main characters are Jesus and this legal expert. But if you go inside the parable or go inside the story that Jesus shares here, there are some other characters. We have the man who was beaten by robbers or overcome by robbers in these newer translations. We have? Well, I guess it means we must have the robbers, too, right? There's the priest, the Levite. A Samaritan. I'll include the donkey. The innkeeper; all characters in this text.

And oftentimes, as I read and I am able to identify which characters show up in the text, I then take this next step. And I placed myself in there as one or more of those characters. Do you do this?

So as you hear this list of characters, which character are you? Depends on the day? It can depend on the day, and it can depend on the situation. I also believe that it may depend on whether you're looking in a mirror or if you're looking out a window. It may depend on whether you're looking in a mirror or looking out a window.

See, a mirror gives us a reflection. It gives us a reflection of ourselves. And we can see ourselves up close, if we choose, we can step back and see ourselves in full view if the mirror and the space allow for that. We can critique what we see, we can sometimes fix what's there if we choose to do so. But here's the thing, when we're looking in a mirror, it's a reflection. And what we see is at reverse angle. And we can only see ourselves in relation to what's behind us. So, we see ourselves and what's behind us when we're in a mirror. And sometimes what's behind us, what's back there calls to us and challenges our ability and our capacity to move forward or to see things differently. It blocks our imagination because it seems too real, right? Mirrors have a way of bringing us a view of what's familiar, but it's not always welcomed. Mirrors can also block what's out in front of us because oftentimes, mirrors are hanging on walls. And we can't see through those.

I think the lawyer that approaches Jesus, this legal expert that approached Jesus was looking through a mirror. He could only see himself and his way of understanding the world and the way of God. But Jesus invites him to step away from the mirror and into a window. He wanted the lawyer to see what was happening beyond himself to see what was happening out ahead, not just what had come before. He wanted him to grasp the possibility that what was behind him may have served him well for a season, but this was a time for him to look ahead.

Jesus wanted him to look at what was going on around him to see the many ways he was not being a good neighbor, even with all the good that he was doing.

He was not being a good neighbor because he limited his understanding of who his neighbor could be. So much so that he was bold enough to ask the question, "Who is my neighbor?"

So, I told you the 'M' is about ministry that matters that's about housing and health, you'll go watch that. You'll have to. And then the 'I' is about itineration and location, you'll watch that, you'll have to. And the 'L' today, it's about lay ministry enhancement; you'll get this. And you'll still want to go back and watch this. And you may ask, well, what does this M I L E have to do with go and do likewise? I am so glad you asked.

What does it have to do with being a good neighbor? Well, it seems that as leaders and members in The United Methodist Church, we've been walking and talking a lot like this legal expert in the text. We've been focusing on the letter of the law. Instead of loving each other as though our lives depend on it. We've been engaged in what I call mirror talk. Just looking at ourselves, talking to ourselves, about ourselves. We've been asking questions that we know already know the answers to. So, we can seem smarter than we actually are. That's mirror talk. We've been looking at ourselves, patting ourselves on our own backs and stabbing others in there's, all in the name of God, while blood is being spilled from Black and brown bodies. Mirror talk.

Children knowing more about active shooter drills and how to dribble a basketball than they know about what it means to be made in the image and the likeness of God. Mirror talk.

Being held hostage to fables and ideals that may not apply to them, but the man won't shut up and sit down long enough for them to speak, mirror talk.

Claiming our church would grow if our children came back without acknowledging that your children have children of their own and live two states away. Yet there are several families with children within a stone's throw of your church who've never heard from you. Mirror talk.

Insisting that if the preaching and teaching were better, things at your church would be different. But you won't take a lay speaking course. You won't read a scripture; you won't pray unless we write it all down for you. Mirror talk.

We go on and on about how the pastor won't visit the sick, and you don't either. Mirror talk.

Knowing you don't want to serve in a role but because no one else will volunteer, you say I'll do it. Mirror talk. See, that's not honorable. You're stepping into somebody else's ministry space. Leave it there. If God wants it done. God will send the person anointed and appointed to do it. Some of you lost the zeal for your ministry because you're doing somebody else's ministry. Some of you can't discover your ministry because you're doing everybody else's ministry.

Asking why does that church down the street have so many members and so many wonderful activities? But your church hasn't entertained a new program or idea in 20 years. Or in the mouth of the lawyer in conversation with Jesus, it may have sounded simply like, "Who is my neighbor?" See, that's mirror talk. Jesus challenges the lawyer to move beyond mirror talk and to do some window work. And that's when he tells him the story.

And he ends of story inquiring about window work. When he asked which one of these three was a neighbor to the man who encountered thieves and the legal expert responded with a window work response. And he says the one who demonstrated mercy toward him, and Jesus told him “go and do likewise,” better yet, “go and do window work.”

So, your window work in your community may be different from the window work in other churches, it may not fit neatly into these categories outlined here in the M. I. L. E. That doesn't mean you say, well, the bishop wants us to do this M.I.L.E. thing. The bishop says, “we're going to do this ministry that matters. We need to focus on this iteration and location, on the lay ministry enhancement, eliminating racism.” And we're not doing that. We have all this other great stuff we're doing that isn't attracting or meaning anything, anybody but because we don't want Mabel to get mad, we're going to just keep doing it.

But it may not fit neatly into these categories. And that's okay. Are you interested in knowing your neighbors? Are you interested and are you showing interest in your neighbors?

So, my few months with you. I've participated in meet-and-greets and listening sessions. I've been reviewing what you've been engaged in over the past few years. I'm trying to hear your concerns, not your gripes, although I've heard some of them. But trying to hear the cries of your hearts. And what I'm seeing is a need for direction, focus, and vision. And what I'm offering is a pathway that can lead us in that direction. I'm offering a pathway for us to move toward discerning our vision by naming areas where we can have great impact, where we can experience unity and listen for God as we do our window work. So, the 'L' of our M.I.L.E. is lay ministry enhancement. It's in the text. You see, Oregon-Idaho didn't think iteration and location was in the text. The 'L' is in the text, too, lay ministry enhancement. Not only are there characters in the Scripture, but there are calls and callings identified in this text.

I mean, there's Jesus, you know, son of God. The lawyer, legal expert. But in the parable, we have the priest who was called to officiate at many offerings under the Law of Moses, and you know, you're all more scholarly than I; they had things to do.

And because of that, the priest's calling and responsibilities led him to the other side of the road to get to his people, to his role with his people. It's like, he knew his lane, and this lane curved. And he went on to do what he had to do. And then there's the Levite who was not quite the priest thing, stuff to do but had responsibilities. important roles to perform.

And in no way am I making light of them. Clear sense about what they were to do, clear sense about what their expectations were. And you've heard all that; you've preached all the sermons about why they had to do what they did, right? I mean, you've preached sermons.

But there was something in that that caused Jesus to have the Levite in the story cross to the other side of the road to get to his people and to his role with his people, or at least to go in a way that whatever was happening

on this side would not get in the way of what he needed to do on the other side. You know, when you have your day laid out, and you know exactly what you need to accomplish in a day and then...

That's the man in the ditch. Me, I have this whole list, and some of it is from lists from three days ago. And if I don't get started now, it's gonna, but...

So, the priest had a call. The Levite had a call. Both had calls and responsibilities that led them to go where they went. And then the Samaritan went into the ditch, cared for the injured man, put him on his own donkey and took him to the inn and did some collaborative and cooperative ministry with the innkeeper. How much of that do you think was on his to-do list when he left the house?

The Samaritan and the innkeeper did not wait for the pastor, the superintendent, the cabinet, the bishop, the judicial council, or general conference. They did not need an edict from on high to tell them what was right to do. They didn't care what the law book said. Someone was in need.

Some law books would have told the innkeeper, "That person can't stay here." Some law books would have told the Samaritan, "You're kind is incompatible."

It seems obvious to me that the Samaritan was a person who was clear, just as clear about who he was as the priest and the Levite. He is clear about who he was and his title. And what others called him or said about him did not deter him from showing mercy. And you know what showing mercy is just about showing up. I can stop right there. But I won't.

See there's a place for set apart and lay ministry in the text as well as in our life and our work. Neither is better than the other, it just doesn't help you or me when we don't know what's possible or what is best. See, our current policy, structures, and behaviors do not always help us. Beloved, we must be as serious about training and sending laity as we are about preparing and sending pastoral leaders. That's our window work. We have to get ready because many congregations and communities' sexism, racism, economics, politics, and unrealistic expectations make it difficult for us to know how to move a congregation forward.

Laity protesting when we send someone who matches more of the best of who you can be, instead of who you were, oh, Jesus. See, there's no harm in saying we're struggling to be better to be more inclusive; no harm in saying that. But it's not okay to say it's too hard. And we're fine just the way we are. If that's true, stop praying. Stop expecting others to change, just assume everyone else made the same choice you made. And they're stuck in the ditch too. There's no harm in saying I don't know what God wants me to do. There's no harm in trying a few things to see what feels right or what's being affirmed in you by others. What's advancing the mission of the church more than it's stroking your ego.

Staying in the mirror is like being stuck in a ditch. It's like being beaten by robbers because the best of who you are cannot be discovered or experienced in the mirror. Certified lay ministry training can be window work if you use what you learn to do something other than to say I'm a CLM.

Because for every CLM who introduces themselves to me and says I'm a CLM. I ask, "And what are you doing?" Is that route in the Pacific Northwest? I probably should have checked this out. Is that rude? I mean, is that is that? I mean, I'm bringing my southern sensibilities, and so I probably should have checked that out with somebody. But you get certified, and you get busy, so we don't think you certifiable.

Being a lay servant minister and doing some speaking within the confines of your church is nice. But going to the senior center or helping a neighboring church that does not have a CLM in the pew? That's fantastic. Providing opportunities for young people to serve? Oh, that's nice! Funding opportunities for them to explore what meaningful service can be for them? That's fantastic. Encouraging someone who is compassionate and attentive to consider licensed or ordained ministry? It's nice. But praying with someone to be open to the many ways God can and will call each of us? That's fantastic.

One of the areas of ministry that's always been dear to me is the ministry of lay leaders. And I want us to expect our lay leaders to do more than run around to all the meetings because that's what we've told them that that's what they're supposed to do. I want our expectations to rise above that. I mean, they're, they're not window dressing. These are ministers in our midst; let's expect them to be ministers in our midst. And let's respect them as ministers in our midst. And if you are looking and you're going, "but they don't do it," well, let's train them to be ministers in our midst.

Because I intend to work closely with our conference lay leaders, our conference and area wide staff to ensure that we have as many resource opportunities for lay ministry, training, and development as we do for clergy. We cannot rest until each of the conferences in the Greater Northwest has a lay equivalent to the Board of Ministry and staffing and resourcing.

This is one way just one way to demonstrate our commitment to a priesthood of all believers or the concept that everyone is called. That's window work. Another pursuit or passion along these lines is an ask I have of each of you. I'm asking every ministry setting every ministry setting to identify at least one person that you will commit to pray with and pray for as they discern what God is calling them to.

And this is not about finding someone who thinks they may be called to licensed, certified, or ordained ministry. This is about that someone who is willing to be open to listen for what God wants them to do. It may be something totally unrelated to the ministry of your local church and thanks be to God if it is. And when that person gets it, move on to the next person. That's window work.

In Jesus' story, the Samaritans window work involved him taking the man who had been beaten to a secure location and ensure he had what he needed to be taken care of. He identified a need and involved himself in the solution. He didn't pass through the other side of the road. He did not assume because he was not a pastor, I'm sorry, but he did not have a title, that he should wait. He engaged in his window work. The legal expert heard the story and responded to Jesus' question. But did he go back to mirror talk or window work?

See, when you decide to do window work, you will still need to take a glance in the mirror from time to time. But when we do window work, we gain a better sense of who we see in the mirror. And while you're in that

mirror, I pray that you ask the question the legal expert asked Jesus who is my neighbor? And as you ask that question in that mirror, I pray that you hear Jesus say, "Go and Do likewise." Better yet, "Go and do your window work."

Amen. Amen. Thanks be to God.