

Mutual Empowerment

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. David B. Wolf,
Executive Director, Samaritan Ministry of Greater Washington (SMGW)
Samaritan Ministry Sunday @ Grace Episcopal Church, Silver Spring, MD
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Text: Matthew 5:38 – 48

It's a great joy to be with you this morning – I'm David Wolf, Executive Director of Samaritan Ministry of Greater Washington and this is our first "Samaritan Ministry Sunday" at Grace in *many* years because it's really the culmination of a partner renewal effort led by your two dynamic Partner Reps, Christy Joria and Rebecca Lent, who get the lion-share of credit for making this visit possible – please give it up for Rebecca and Christy! I'm also grateful to your Rector, Andrew, for making this opportunity possible. I've come to know and appreciate Andrew since he and I began our "new" ministries at Grace and Samaritan in same time frame (2011-12). There are many more of you who have contributed greatly to this *partnership* over the years; obviously, I can't name you here but please know how grateful I am for your gifts.

I've mentioned partnership a couple times already and some of you are already scratching your heads thinking, 'Partnership? What partnership? He must be speaking euphemistically as people do these days.' To the contrary, brothers and sisters: Partnership is not a euphemism at Samaritan Ministry – you are part of a living *collaboration of over 60 partner churches and schools* that stretches across that Potomac Ocean to our Virginia friends, as well to Prince George's County and all quadrants of the District. What Christy and Rebecca have cultivated over the past two years is nothing less than a re-engagement of Grace is this community of communities who are as committed *to being change-agents as they are to being positively changed themselves*. This is a ministry of *mutual* empowerment – a two-way street, designed to change ALL who participate – not just the people we serve, but volunteers and leaders as well. I mean that's what *ministry* is all about anyway, isn't it?

To be sure this vision of *mutual empowerment* is not just our vision; it's the vision Jesus describes in today's Gospel – the vision of a world defined by disciples doing the *opposite* of what we instinctively want to do, the opposite of what the Apostle Paul called the 'worldly wisdom' that is foolishness in God's eyes. What does that worldly wisdom look like? It tells us to *despise* our enemies but *love* our friends; to hoard what we have because, you know, there's not enough to go around, and besides, it's ours; and, when it comes to strangers, the best defense is a good offense: Don't be vulnerable, don't get to close – right?

Wrong, Jesus says: 'Do the opposite! Practice *mutual empowerment*, not just self-empowerment. No more tit-for-tats. Be generous with your time, talent and treasure . . . and you'll receive abundance! Turn the tables on anyone who wants the shirt off your back and give them your best coat . . . it will transform that relationship; and this one, "Love your enemies; let them bring out the best in you, not the worst!"

Why this counter-cultural coaching from Jesus? Because it's how unfulfilling relationships get rewired and our aimless lives get restructured for the better. It's how we turn enemies into neighbors and strangers into friends. Jesus' coaching is basically a blueprint for *how transformation happens* within ourselves and our communities . . . how we build communities of mutual empowerment versus communities of mutual disinterest, if not destruction.

Jesus sums his coaching up his coaching to us in a final verse: “Be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect.” Well, have to say ‘thank you Jesus, but I don’t know what that means practically!’ So: Let me offer an unpacked – but equally authoritative – translation into something we understand: “GROW UP! You’re subjects in God’s Kingdom – now live like it! Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives towards you. BE THE CHANGE YOU WANT TO SEE IN THE WORLD!”¹

So if we want to see positive change in the world, we ourselves need to BE that change first – do you believe that?

At Samaritan Ministry, we believe that and we empower people to be the change they want to see in both *themselves* and the world around them. We specifically partner with anyone who is ‘stuck’ who wants to get ‘unstuck’ – showing them that life-change is possible, that one can really change direction. “Stuck” is our technical term for the presenting challenge that someone brings, but is really describes the human condition, amen? So we invite our clients – who we call “participants” because they participate in their own change-work – to get unstuck through our process called Next Step – a blend of coaching, counseling and problem-solving that draws on clinical insight but which is intentionally relational.

Now as you might imagine, many of our participants show up with urgent needs for food or housing, which are real and urgent – but do you know their greatest need is, whether or not they can articulate at first? Their greatest need is for the kind of compassion that actually *challenges* them to make plans, set goals and take small manageable “next steps” to meet those goals – and therefore, to get un-stuck! And we tell them: All those other needs will be addressed as well, if and only if they are willing to admit they are stuck; if they are willing to participate in their own change.

Now I’m saying “they” but I really mean WE, don’t I? I mean, who among us has *not* been stuck? Raise your hand (I dare you) if you have never been stuck in this life! What our participants receive in the Next Step process is what we ALL receive – or need to receive – from *some* source. We call it “rigorous compassion” but it’s really two things: Support and encouragement on the one hand, and challenge and accountability on the other. It includes what your spouse or your partner or your parent or your best friend says to you that you would rather NOT hear. It is the truth in love.

You know what I mean? If all those folks ever offer us are words of support then we might want to re-evaluate those relationships, right? *Rigorous compassion* is comforting and kind but it is also a fearsome challenge. It’s an invitation to partner in the best sense, in the hope that we who do will be empowered to be the people God calls us to be. I believe it’s what Jesus meant when he said, “Blessed are those who take no offense at me,” because he knew that many would *want* to embrace transformational change in the abstract but would *resist* the “rigorous compassion” required to get there – and therefore take offense at his truth-talking.

So on my office door at Samaritan Ministry is an Australian aboriginal saying that has been there since the earliest years of Samaritan Ministry when Carter Echols put it there. It reads:

“If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”

¹ This translation, with one addition from me, is from Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Navpress, 2002).

It speaks not only to what we're about and how we work at Samaritan Ministry but also to what Jesus was about, namely inviting would-be disciples like us to participate in our *own* liberation, our *own* empowerment – and the empowerment of our communities by partnering with others who – though very different from ourselves – will share in our struggle and we in theirs.

So I invite you: You *you* (i.e., personally) and you as a historic partner parish to be find your niche in this ministry of mutual empowerment which is really ours to share. There are many niches to engage your time, talent and treasure, as Rebecca and Christy will attest – this is hardly a cookie-cutter ministry. And following their lead, what are your hopes and dreams are for this partnership? I'd love to know. As a resident of Silver Spring myself, how can we turn the tables on homelessness in Silver Spring and our region? How can we empower everyone to find meaningful employment? Might Grace be the site of another Samaritan satellite office on this end of town, to compliment the one we have at Our Savior, Hill-and-dale?

There is so much to do, I know. Getting overwhelmed, you may wonder, 'Where do I start?' Here's a suggestion: Start with engaging in a relationship rather than studying "the issue." (Talk about counter-cultural coaching for Washingtonians!) Why? Because the point of Jesus' challenge is that it is the Stranger, our Enemy, the invisible OTHER – who have the most to teach us. Jesus said: "For if we love those who love us, if all we do is love the lovable – what reward do we have?"

So specifically *what* you do doesn't matter as much as *how it impacts and changes* you. Why? Because if we don't participate in our own liberation (empowerment), how can we participate in the liberation (empowerment) of others or, I hasten to add, the liberation (empowerment) of the world around us.

I hope this sermon is not an isolated event but the start of a conversation – of many conversations actually, conversations that are nothing less than an opportunity to imagine and work for a world where we are enriched by our needy neighbors: Where our enemies become partners, where homeless strangers become friends – and where we finally come to know the life-changing power of partnering with each other and with the One who invites us to BE the change that we – and He – wants to see in this world.

[And God's People said, **Amen.**]