Let us pray:
Gracious God, Without your love, we are nothing; and there is nothing without your love. Amen.

What a gift it is to be here with you tonight. The Spirit of God is moving through this diocese with compassion, creativity, and courage. As a diocese we are on a journey, walking the way, caught up somewhere between where we’ve been and where we are going. Tonight we take one more step on our journey together, praying, learning, and loving each other with fierce courage and wild hope.

As liturgical people, we are still in the season of Ordinary Time… or as we call it in our household, a season of Surprise.

This season calls us to pay attention to the golden glow of divinity making herself known in the ordinary world around us….We are opening our hearts and practicing the courage it takes to lean into the people and places we may easily pass by, being the church that offers shelter wherever we go.

A season of Surprise is full of remembering that God is on this journey with us, showing up in the desert, at the corner of urban streets, in the check out lines, and in the stories of enemies and strangers. We are traveling with a God who doesn’t stop at words and right answers, but instead cloaks words in flesh, who sees our suffering and snotty-nosed, quirky humanity, and courageously moves towards us anyway. We are with a God who chooses new power dynamics, claiming vulnerability and compassion as the centerpieces of righteousness.

My ears have been pressed to the ground of the Parable of the Good Samaritan for a month. I have done metaphorical wind sprints between Jerusalem and Jericho, the 18 mile stretch of desert, rugged-rocky road, that is known for its high traffic, and violence. The windy road is where religious elite, enemies, and sojourners would pass by one another in the desert.

Deserts are not romantic places. They are full of harsh climates, thirsting, and desolation. Food deserts, spiritual deserts, urban deserts, are all forms of hunger that fill our world. The two stories that we have heard tonight echo the reality of suffering that takes place in desert spaces.

And yet, they are the exact places where an oasis is found in an act of kindness, as much as in a loaf of bread, or in an unlikely place of shelter.

Most of us have experienced some form of desert. It is the place of scarcity and loneliness…the place where what we need feels hard to come by. Most of us travel through deserts- whether literal ones, or through food deserts looking for healthy food to eat, or among urban contexts where housing feels scarce, or on the spiritual journey- where loneliness and desolation take their toll.

Parker Palmer tells a story about his desert experience through depression. Depression is its own form of deep loneliness and desolation. Many of his friends tried to offer him right words and quick fix answers to lift him from depression. Parker understood their good intentions but shares that it was not right answers or quick fix solutions that eventually moved him through the desert of his depression. He said that he had one friend, who would come over each night to his home.
His friend would knock on the door, look him in the eyes, sit down at his feet, and begin to take off Parker’s socks and shoes. For the next hour, his friend would sit silently, rubbing his feet. Parker talks about how this friend’s presence, and wordless compassionate action, was the exact healing balm he needed.

There is an Irish saying that has been rolling around in my heart since Heather and I moved to this diocese. It is offered by the beautiful story-teller and theologian Padraig O’Tuama. The Irish saying translates this way:

It is in the shelter of each other that the people live.

Isn’t it so true?
It is in the shelter of each other that the people live.

...We are the shelter that we long for. The offering of our presence is offering a place of sanctuary. And as we move deeper into the world, getting outside our buildings and imagine new ways of being church, this is very Good News for us.

And I think that Jesus, in telling the parable of the Good Samaritan, is up to some really loving stuff that has to do with sheltering each other---of reaching out to call each other in. This parable somehow manages to indict and invite us: it is the tune-up and the hope that we need to hear, especially if we are to usher in a new generation of being church.

To the Lawyer’s question: What must I do to inherit eternal life?
Jesus responds, in good rabbinic form, with another question. How do you read the Law?
The lawyer gives the right answer: Love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and love your neighbor as yourself.
Jesus says, yes, good answer. Now go do it.

We are to be people who not only know the right answers, but manage to act on them.
But the lawyer isn’t finished… So…Who is my neighbor?

This is a good question. This is a question that many of us live with everyday. Who is my neighbor, really means: who am I responsible for? Who is responsible for me?

And to this question, we know what happens next. Jesus gifts us with this parable that somehow, no many how many times I hear it, manages to work on me... rather than for me.

We find this parable in the Gospel of Luke. Luke is a brilliant writer who wants to bend our ears towards justice, and actions towards reconciliation. Luke wants his Gospel to be healing for the whole world. So, he sets up this parable with a reminder of the broken relationship between the Samaritans and Jews. The prologue to this story is set a few stories back when Jesus and his disciples were on their way to Jerusalem.

Jesus sent them ahead into Samaria to scope out a place to stay for the night, the Samaritans reject them, the disciples want to bring down fire from heaven to retaliate, where Jesus responds no: we do not meet violence with violence.
Luke reminds us of the freshness of this huge ancient wound between Jews and Samaritans because the parable Jesus is about to tell is not only about compassion, it is a story of reconciliation between two Old testament enemies who shared the same blood.

And so, we know how this parable plays itself out. We have the robbers, the man in the ditch, the priest, Levite, Samaritan, inn keeper, and donkey. There is a whole network, a whole system of relationship that is at play. For us, the church, this is good news. It means that it is not just one person at the center of the story doing this mercy, healing stuff alone. There are multiple layers of relationship and a community that is trying to teach us something about relying on one another...each of us doing our part to offer a healing balm to this hurting world.

So, we know that there is a man in the ditch who has been robbed, beaten, left half dead. A person whose identity is unknown, and frankly that’s because it could be anyone, or any one of us. We each have been in the ditch of our own suffering, vulnerable, hoping that someone will reach down into it and help us out.

Some of the most compassionate people I know often tell stories of being on the receiving end of mercy. They are able to pass the gift on because they are able to recognize where they have received it in the first place. I believe that these acts of kindness come in many forms. Our wounds are bandaged: in prayer shawls, cups of water, a loving gaze... and even in advocacy and protest.

Mercy often feels like grace, doesn’t it?

We know that the Levite and the priest, for whatever reason, see and pass by the man. There is a tremendous temptation to shame these two figures of the story. But I think shame is a waste of time and it doesn’t help us get anywhere loving or liberating. They walked by. I’ve walked by. That isn’t Jesus’ point. His point is that if the disciples were to hear a story about a priest and Levite, they would of automatically assumed that the third to be an Israelite. But it wasn’t. He said Samaritan. Their jaws would of dropped.

Jesus does something full of Grace. In naming the Samaritan as the one who enacts neighborly compassion, he offers a new narrative. Can’t you see the disciples heads turning... what if Samaritans aren’t just the ones, the others, who do inhospitable, challenging things.... What if the Samaritans just aren’t on the “other side”, or our enemies to hate... What if the Samaritans are capable of mercy?

Jesus flips the script. This is the starting place of reconciliation...heaven on earth type of living. Jesus helps them see the other with eyes of compassion. In this moment, Jesus has just dissolved the boundaries... Anyone is capable of loving action, even those people.

The Samaritan “saw” the suffering man, just like the Priest and Levite, but moved towards the man, and as he moved towards the man, he was changed even more because he started to feel compassion. The language Luke uses isn’t warm and fuzzy feelings of mercy, but of bodily ache. His insides are crawling because there’s something going on with the man in the ditch that is lighting up something in him.

We know this feeling. We know the feeling that happens when someone we love is suffering, and we get close enough to hear their cry, to see their dried blood on their skin, to touch their hurting body. It breaks our hearts and makes our body ache.
This moment between seeing and moving towards suffering is a courageous one. I’d love to know the story behind the Samaritan. How was he able to muster the leap between seeing, having the information, and acting with mercy anyway?

It is difficult to move towards the flesh and blood that information describes. But when we see each other through the eyes of love, and when we care more about the goodness inherit inside each of us, rather than any other narrative society gives to us… it is remembering that our core humanity is beloved…when we see each other with eyes of love…this is when we are capable of mustering the courage to move towards the flesh and blood that information describes.

Henri Nouwen talks about the movement from hostility to hospitality as one of the great movements of the spiritual life. He says, “Our heart might desire to help others: to feed the hungry, visit the prisoners, and offer a shelter to travelers, but meanwhile we have surrounded ourselves with a wall of fear and hostile feelings, instinctively avoiding people and places where we might be reminded of our good intentions. Hospitality is the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place.”

The Samaritan has enough space in his heart and on his donkey, and the inn keeper enough room at his inn to share it with the man in the ditch.

*Creating space for strangers is part of the spiritual life.*

The Samaritan, the donkey, the inn keeper- these are the character Luke uses to show us that it is through a community of compassion, that brokenness is seen, bandaged, transported, and nourished back to health. It is through these characters that we learn that God meets us on this dusty difficult road, *through* the love and space we hold for each other.

The hero of this story is the community of compassion.

A community that,

sees with eyes of love,

dissolves the boundaries of neighborliness,

offers shelter in the desert,

and provides a healing balm to anyone who needs it.

We are to be a community of compassion,

The church that

Creates space for others,

Creates space for God,

Creates space to be the church that is emerging with a renewed sense of *fierce courage and wild hope*.

We are to be a community of compassion that:

Offers shelter

No matter where we are, or where we go-

We are to be the church that

Practices relational courage, over, and over, and over again.
And as we keep practicing relational courage,
Trust, that enough small moments of compassionate action will begin to accumulate,
And before you know it, we will have lived lives of beautiful, courageous loving—
… and we will witness our wounds healing.

Friends, We are invited to be the people of the Jesus Movement, and movements start when one person joins another, and then another, and then another, until there is a whole community being formed— all of us— together, one action of mercy at a time, each doing our part to participate in witnessing to heaven being born on earth.

One action of mercy at a time matters—
Trust this, The Lord will be with you.