

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
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First Presbyterian Church
Luke 10:25-37

“The Good Samaritan”

Is there anything new to be said about the story of the Good Samaritan? There are not many other Biblical stories that are so well known or quoted. Even a person who knows nothing about the Bible might know something about the Good Samaritan. We have Good Samaritan laws; and the Good Samaritan’s name has been enshrined in hospitals and care centers. The parable of the Good Samaritan is so well known for its message of aiding the stranger that it’s become a staple of political discourse. President George W. Bush invoked the parable in his first inaugural address; he said: “I can pledge our nation to a goal: when we see that wounded traveler on the road to Jericho, we will not pass to the other side.” For President Bush, the parable was about taking care of nations in distress. Queen Elizabeth remarked in her 2004 Christmas message that the parable, which tells how a mugging victim is helped by a “despised foreigner”, is about “tolerance and respecting others.” She summarizes: “Everyone is our neighbor, no matter what race, creed, or color. The need to look after a fellow human being is far more important than any cultural or religious differences.” More recently, in 2013, former Prime Minister Tony Blair offered his own interpretation. At the opening of a new Baptist Center in Jordan, Mr. Blair, speaking on behalf of the Faith Foundation, said Jesus “extols the virtue of the Good Samaritan, the stranger, over those who were supposedly devout believers.”

And of course, endless sermons have been preached on the Good Samaritan, all with basically the same message: be like the Good Samaritan.

This is a fine message and I’ve preached it on more than one occasion. Lord knows our society could use more people who behave like the Good Samaritan. But the difficulty in this interpretation is that it’s easy, too easy, and more comfortable than it should be, because when the Bible starts to feel like our most comfortable pair of pants – which is to say soft and well-worn with a hefty bit of stretch and give, well – it’s a sign that we’re starting to read it the wrong way. In her 2015

book, The Short Stories of Jesus, New Testament and Jewish Studies professor Amy-Jill Levine argues that religion is meant to “comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable.” She further suggests that we would do well to think of the parables of Jesus as doing this afflicting. She writes: “If we hear a parable and think, ‘I really like that’ or worse, fail to take any challenge, we are not listening well enough.” Friends, if we read, nod, and walk away from the Good Samaritan, unafflicted and unchanged, we should read it again and again and again until we’re afflicted and changed.

So let’s consider it again:

“Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus: “Teacher”, he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

This question sets the context for the parable, so the first thing you should know is that Luke doesn’t hold lawyers in high regard. *Present company excluded of course!* Luke often lumps lawyers in with the Pharisees, or accuses them of not lifting a finger to help, or calls them unrighteous. Now this isn’t how other Biblical writers characterize lawyers! But Luke does. So it shouldn’t come as a surprise that it’s a lawyer who tests Jesus.

But Jesus evades the trick question, and turns it back to the lawyer. “What is written in the law? What do you read there?”

The lawyer responds by citing two verses of the Torah known by all practicing Jews then and now. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” The lawyer knew the commandments and gave the right answer.

“You are correct,” Jesus replied. “Do this, and you will live.” Notice the subtle turn of phrase here, because it’s important. The lawyer asked what he must do to inherit life. But Jesus reframes it and speaks of what is important now. In other words, the focus should be on how we live now and not what comes after.

Were the lawyer wise, he would have thanked Jesus and gone on his way. But he didn’t, so he asks another question so he can look good in front of his audience. “And who is my neighbor?” he asks. It’s not a bad question, and it even has some legal merit. In the legal system one needs to know who one’s neighbors are and,

well, who one's neighbors are not. But Jesus senses that the lawyer's question is a polite way of asking, "Who isn't my neighbor?" Or, "Who does not deserve my love?" Or, "Whose lack of food and shelter may I ignore?" Or, "Whom can I hate?"

So Jesus tells the lawyer a story.

"A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead."

So who was the man? Who knows? The man could be rich or poor, free or slave, priest or lay, nice or naughty. He could have been anyone, and Jesus' listeners would have had no trouble identifying with him. They knew that the path from Jerusalem to Jericho was an 18 mile long rocky path that descended from 2500 feet to 825 feet. In other words, it was steep and treacherous. They also knew that it was the road on which King David fled from his rebellious son Absalom, and that King Zedekiah escaped his pursuers on that road. Its dangers were well known to Jesus' audience. Also, let's not gloss over the violence of what's just occurred. Robbers have stripped a man, beaten him, and left him half dead in a ditch beside the road. He's naked without any provisions and barely alive. Anyone listening should stop to pause and pray that someone – anyone -- would stop and help them if they were in that situation.

Jesus goes on. "Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side."

Now I want to pause here, because if you've heard this story preached before, you've maybe heard preachers give the priest and Levite a hall pass as to why they didn't stop; stating that the two couldn't help the man because tending to a corpse was forbidden by Jewish law. But Professor Levine says this isn't true. Jewish law dictated that both men must stop to help the victim whether he's dead or alive because (ironically) loving one's neighbor required it! There was no acceptable excuse for not stopping to help, Levine writes. Instead, they were likely only thinking of themselves.

It would have come as a surprise to Jesus' audience that the religious professionals didn't stop. But what wasn't a surprise to them, was the way Jesus told the story. Jesus often used a rule of 3 when telling a parable. Meaning, the

first two examples he uses are of what not do, but the third example is the one we should follow. And in this story, it's probably likely that the audience would have assumed that the 3rd person Jesus mentions would be an Israelite who would stop to help.

But that's not who helps, is it?

"But a Samaritan while travelling came near him, and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil on and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, "I will repay you whatever more you spend."

Well, well, well, what do we have here? A Samaritan stopping to help? Taking his day to save someone's life? Paying the hospital bill and all?

Friends, it's hard to overstate how much of an oxymoron it was to say that someone was a Good Samaritan. Jews in Jesus' day thought the Samaritans were descendent from rapists and murderers, collaborators with rulers who oppressed God's people and who worshiped at a corrupt Temple. Samaritans were not good; they were oppressors, despised by Jews and the animosity ran deep. The tensions started when the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel split in the 900s BCE. It intensified when the Assyrian Empire captured the northern kingdom in the 700s, and the Babylonian Empire captured the southern half in 587 BCE and took them as POWs. By the time of Jesus the hatred had hardened into ethnic, political, and religious animosity. It makes our partisan battles look like chump change. Why, just before this parable Jesus tells a story in the 9th chapter of Luke about a Samaritan village that refused to accept him.

And it's important to know so you can fully understand how challenging this story is that the Samaritan wasn't a social victim, as some have said. The Samaritan had money, the freedom to travel, the ability to find lodging, and had some leverage with the innkeeper. In short, the Samaritan had power. Contrary to what you may have heard, the Samaritan was not a member of an oppressed group. The Samaritan wasn't the poor person who came along and helped when the ministers chose to walk on by. And I don't say this to give myself a pass, I say it because for too long we in the majority have identified with the Samaritan, and

therefore claimed the mantle of both victor and savior. And that's an easy role to play. Who doesn't want to be the helper? It's rewarding and gratifying. It never occurs to us that we could be the person in the ditch, because we're the do-gooders, not the victims.

And so, friends, the challenge in the parable isn't to be the Good Samaritan, helping the person you don't like. The challenge is to be the person in the ditch who is forced to accept help from the very person or group we despise and who we may even view as our oppressor. Herein lies the challenge and affliction of this parable.

The scandal here is that we're taught about genuine love from the people we hate. Loving our neighbor isn't just about helping our neighbor, it's also about being willing to accept that the very person or group we loathe can teach us something about compassion and righteousness.

To hear the shock value of the parable today we only need to update the identities of the figures. So, for example:

- I was beaten, robbed, stripped and left for dead in a ditch. But when I came to I saw that the one who took compassion on me was . . . Nancy Pelosi or (depending upon your affiliation) Jim Banks.
- A guy in a red MAGA hat or . . . protesting at the Black Lives Matter rally.
- Had an AR-15 in the back of his pick-up or . . . was soliciting signatures to ban such weapons.
- Had spent his life "praying the gay away" or . . . was carrying a rainbow flag.
- Closer to home, maybe your Samaritan is your ex, or the boss who fired you, or the person who did you dirty, or the person who for whatever reason at this time in your life you've decided is enemy #1.

You get the gist.

As Dr. Levine writes:

"To hear this parable in contemporary terms, we should think of ourselves as the person in the ditch, and then ask, "Is there anyone, from any group, about whom we'd rather die than acknowledge, "She offered help" or "he showed compassion"?' More, is there any group whose members might rather die than

help us? If so, then we know how to find the modern equivalent for the Samaritan.”

Friends, the parable is a challenge not because it tells us to be kind to people we don't like – even though that's a challenge. It's a challenge because it tells us we have to accept kindness from people we don't like. And That's a challenge. Because only when we do that will we turn away from hatred. Because it's hard to hate those who have saved us.

The theologian Douglass John Hall wrote that the parable of the Good Samaritan sums up the essence of Christianity, and he didn't say that because the story can be reduced to a simple, “Be nice like the Samaritan.” Though I won't argue that kindness is important and in short supply these days.

“Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “God and do likewise.”

Folks, Christianity is about more than being kind. It's also about seeing kindness in people we hate. That's how you love your neighbor. Christianity is about understanding that even our enemy has something to offer us. That even the person we cannot stand has something to teach us.

Perhaps when both sides begin to understand that then, and only then, can we travel down the road God desires and really put into practice loving God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all strength, and with all our mind, and loving our neighbor as ourselves.

Because, as Diana Butler Bass writes:

“Right now, however, most of us are in the ditch. Few of us were prepared for that . . . Down here, we feel hopeless, hurt, afraid, and angry. We stare in shock at those who threaten to run us over if we don't get out of their way. In the ditch, however, we have the chance to learn the most radical truth of all — even our enemy is our neighbor. The endless cycle of revenge and retaliation can be broken by only one thing: a hand extended in mercy” and a hand that accepts it.

Amen.

Sources:

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