

The Good Samaritan – a Story for Our Time?

Luke 10: 25-37

Familiar stories can still have the power to bless us. They can still challenge and cause us to look at ourselves honestly. They can also be so familiar that we, in hearing them, sometimes overlook the details. We sometimes miss their real power. We sometimes forget what it really meant to those who first heard them.

There is not a more powerful and challenging story in the biblical library than Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan. Most of us know it so well. It teaches the importance of helping others. We even call one who helps another in need a "Good Samaritan". But what was Jesus really saying? What would 1st century hearers have heard that ours miss? And, how is this a story for our time?

What do you remember about the parable of the Good Samaritan? A man was going down the long and steep road from Jerusalem to Jericho. This was just an ordinary guy, like one of Jesus' audience. It was a dangerous road, a wilderness road – the domain of outlaws. But it was the only route to Jericho.

Our traveler was going down it alone when the worst happens. He "fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead." They mugged him. By good fortune, "a priest was going down that road, but when he saw him, he passed by on the other side." Why? Well, he did have a legal loophole. He had to stay ritually pure which was crucial for his job as a priest. If the poor traveler actually happened to be dead, and the priest touched him, then he would become ritually unclean and would not be able to enter the temple for at least a week. He would not be able to do the work of a priest. So, weighing the conflicting demands of work and compassion, the priest chose work and passed on by.

Likewise, a Levite, who was actually another type of priest, came along. Same constraints. Same response. "When he came to the place and saw [the man, he] passed by on the other side."

Maybe Jesus' listeners were getting a little angry by this time. Maybe they were realizing that their religious leaders were doing that same thing to them -- passing by them, ignored their need, their pain, in a hurry to get to church. Jesus has set them all up for the story's hero, who now enters.

A Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity he went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil 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."

Then, turning to the lawyer, Jesus asks, "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" The answer was obvious, clear, and unavoidable. "The one who showed him mercy." He couldn't even bring himself to say "Samaritan". Jesus must have smiled as he said to lawyer "You go and do the same."

What is the meaning of the parable of the Good Samaritan? To find the truth of a parable, you have to find yourself in it. When are you the Samaritan, the outsider? When do you find yourself in a position to make a positive difference and, then, you act and really help? Do you see in yourself the Samaritan, the unlikely hero, who sometimes comes through when it counts?

When are you that priest who walks on by? Is that person in you? When a homeless person comes begging money here at the church house or on the street corner, how do you respond? Even though not giving money in that situation is usually the better response, that's the time I feel like the priest who passed by on the other side of the road.

The most effective way to be a Good Samaritan today is to get involved with a ministry that helps proactively. This congregation has a Neighborhood Partnership ministry and is also involved with Community LINC. These groups offer opportunities and effective ways to invest your self in the lives of others. Or start a new group through our church to help people in need or to change oppressive and debilitating systems here in our community.

What about those robbers? Not many of us want to see ourselves in that role, but honesty compels us to admit that sometimes we do rob people of their dignity, independence, and self-respect. We sometimes look down on people who are different and exclude those who make us uncomfortable. We sometimes support, at least passively, unjust laws and dehumanizing policies that rob people of the opportunity to grow and live joyfully. How often do we fail to notice these people left hurt and bleeding by the side of the pathway we walk.

And do you find yourself in the central character of Jesus' story, the wounded traveler? Is there a wounded traveler in you? Jesus invites us to see ourselves living our lives and then, suddenly, robbed, beaten, and left half dead by the side of the road. This can happen in so many ways. You can lose your job in a depressed economy. You might suffer a catastrophic illness without medical insurance. You might experience the loss of a loved one or the death of a cherished dream of what your life might have been. You might be left depressed, despondent, and broken by the side of the road.

It is in that very moment, that having a God who embraces us in our brokenness is more than just a nice idea. "Who is my neighbor?" has a distinctly different flavor and great sense of urgency when your world has fallen apart. When you find a wounded traveler along your way, is it too much to consider doing what the Samaritan did? Sometimes I think I just can't do it. It seems too threatening and, besides, I usually have other plans.

There are just two options to how you read this story. One option is that it's you by the side of road in desperate need. You had no plans to get mugged, or get fired; no plans to get sick or get pregnant; no plans to be living by yourself or to be gay; no plans to have your world turn upside side. How badly do you want someone else to stop and help? How badly do you want to be included? One option is that it's you along that road.

The other option is that it's Jesus lying there. He is broken and bleeding and wondering if you'll stop. Come to think of it, that's really the only option. Jesus is there, in someone's skin. Jesus is there in someone who is desperately in need. Jesus is there in the person who had no plans to be so helpless. How badly does Jesus want you to stop and help and heal? How badly do you want to stop and help?

How can you help? There are two ways to respond to the wounded traveler. They are both vital. They are both expressions of love. The first we call charity. The King James Version translates *agapé* love with the word charity – “now abideth faith, hope, and charity, these three, but the greatest of these is charity. Charity is ministry to the victims, to those who are hurting and hungry. The church is good at charity, pretty good at binding up the physical and even the emotional wounds, feeding the hungry, and comforting the afflicted.

We have not tended to be as good at the second vital response. That is to change the process that allows robbers to attack and priests to walk on by. Loving your neighbor also means transforming the ways we live that permit injustice, bigotry, and entrenched poverty.

What does the story mean? What was the question again? There are actually two stories here and two questions. Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan, but that story took place in the middle of another story – told by the gospel writer Luke. It begins, “A lawyer stood up to test Jesus.” That lawyer stood up to test Jesus with a question, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” What did he mean?

My first thought is that the lawyer's question is another way of asking, “How can I be sure I'll go to heaven when I die?” Many people in our own day ask that same question. “How can I be sure I am saved?” For many Christians, the overwhelming reason to have religious faith is for the assurance of “going to heaven” when they die. That's what “being saved” is all about.

How will this story change for us if we adjust our assumption? What if we consider the lawyer's question as relating to present? “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” becomes “How do I find meaning in life?” “How do I find the quality of life that is God-centered and makes life worth living?”

With that change, the focus of the question, and of Jesus' answer, shift dramatically. It's no longer a question of rewards. It's no longer a matter of “What can I do now to assure myself of a heavenly reward after this life?” The question now becomes, “How can my life be worth living?” “How can I be all that I can be?”

The answer is simple. We know what the Bible says. “Love one another. Help the least of these. Lay down your life for a friend. Do justice. Love mercy. Walk with God. Embrace peace.” It's really common sense. There's no real way around it. To find life's deepest meaning, our faith tells us to live and act as Jesus would today, to love ourselves as God loves us, to love others as we love ourselves.

There are lots of Jericho roads in life. There are lots of challenges to stop and help and heal. There are lots of chances to fall, as well -- lots of robbers and lots of ditches. The falls we experience, and the opportunity to be with others in their

brokenness, are the doorways to God-like life Jesus' proclaimed. We connect with God by loving these neighbors and by being available for them to love us.

To love your neighbor is to live your love for God. It is to respect the differences with others and really listen to them. It is to treat them as important to you, to notice them and regard them worthy of your attention. To love them is to look for the good in them, to affirm their strengths. To love them is to help them build bridges to health and, with them, to build bridges to community.

In relationship, in connecting, in reaching out to them, we are healed. In our brokenness, we are healed and we heal. In stopping to help, we are saved.

In 2 weeks, those from this congregation who are now in Guatemala, will stand here and tell you how meaningful their trip was. They will say that they received much more than they gave. In so doing, they will illustrate for you eternal life in the present tense -- life lived as it should be. Eternal life means receiving more than you give because of what you give and because of how and where you give. Such an investment is not an effort to get ahead or try not to get left behind. It is having enough faith in God that you can invest yourself in making the world better.

Last Sunday, we heard from the youth and young adults who went to the Wind River Reservation on a mission trip. They stood right here and told us how wonderful their experience was. They told us how much more they received than they gave by living from the inside out. They shared how the experience had affected them. They told us how much joy they felt as a result

That is the meaning of the parable of the Good Samaritan. It's not about scoring points for the Last Judgment. It is about waking up to the reality of heaven as it sits at our feet. It's about living the prayer of St. Francis:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace,
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy;
For it is in giving that we receive;
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Lord, let some Samaritan embrace me in my brokenness
so that we both may find life in all its abundance
Let me embrace some wounded traveler in my life
so that we may both find life in all its abundance
Let us in this room today respond with charity and with
courage to challenge and transform a system that breaks
people and leaves them lying by the side of the road.

Bring healing to us, through us, in us, and between us in
Jesus' name. Amen