

“The Good Samaritan”

Isaiah 55:1-5; Matthew 20:1-15

August 2, 2020

A few years back I recall reading the story of a young man named Wesley Autry. You may have run across his story as well. To refresh your memory, Wesley Autrey is the construction worker who leapt onto the subway tracks in New York City to save a man. The other man, a complete stranger, had fallen onto the rail tracks after having lost consciousness due to a seizure. Seeing the man lying there unconscious on the tracks, Wesley made a snap decision. He decided in an instant that risking his own life was worthwhile if he could potentially save the unknown man. Wesley selflessly jumped into the path of that train, saving the stranger from certain death. His actions earned Wesley the nickname, “The Subway Samaritan.”

Now, whether we heard about Wesley or not, I think you’ll agree, stories like his always spark an admiration deep within us. Who doesn’t want to imagine that, given a similar situation occur in our lives, that we’ll respond with the same action, the same lack of concern about one’s own well-being?

And who knows, maybe we would? I hope so.

But I do know that, right now, there are literally billions of people standing in deep need within this world going unassisted, it may be overly optimistic to assume so. If you’re anything like me, sometimes, I recognize the right thing to do, but create reasons why I, myself, can’t do it. Not at the moment, at least. I’m too busy, too burdened, too fill-in-the-blank to do the good for others I’d like to do.

And it reminds me of a show my kids like back when they were younger. The Wonder Pets tells the musical saga of three baby animals. By day, they’re mild-mannered caged pets in a school classroom. Once the teachers and the students leave though, they become caped super-heroes. They’re armed with no special powers though. All they’ve got is the power of TEAMWORK. But the Wonder Pets use that teamwork to help other animals across the globe.

There’s one of the Wonder Pets I’ll confess I understand just a bit more than the others. Her name’s Ming-Ming. She’s a duckling and she’s the most prudent of all of them. One time, when the Wonder Pets were on vacation, a baby-hermit crab needed help. It was Ming-Ming who vociferously objected to the venture. “We’re on vacation,” she cried out, “somebody else will just have to do it.” On another occasion, a particularly obnoxious bunny required their help. “No way,” said Ming-Ming, “I’m not helping HIM.”

You see, I understand Ming-Ming because she’s obviously willing to help but only as long as certain conditions are fulfilled.

We all create conditions before we’ll extend a helping hand, don’t we?

Aren’t there always other considerations to be made?

“Does the person REALLY need help?” we wonder.

“Won’t the money I give this organization really just go to support the staff and not the people in need?” we ask

“I won’t help that person,” we say, feeling confident that the person in need really just created their own mess. “They should clean it up themselves, not me,” we say.

I think we all have a little more Ming-Ming in us than we’d like to admit.

This morning I’m continuing a summer sermon series looking at some of the parables Jesus tells in the gospels. The parables are all relatively easy stories to comprehend that teach us something about the Kingdom of God. This morning, I’ll be reading from the Gospel of Luke, the 10th chapter, verses 25-37. Hear now the Word of our Lord:

⁵ And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” ²⁶ He said to him, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” ²⁷ And he answered, “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.” ²⁸ And he said to him, “You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.”

²⁹ But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” ³⁰ Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. ³¹ Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³² So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. ³⁴ He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵ And the next day he took out two denarii^[c] and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’ ³⁶ Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” ³⁷ He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” And Jesus said to him, “You go, and do likewise.”

Jesus’ telling of the parable of the Good Samaritan is brought about following an exchange with a lawyer. Now it’s helpful to know, I think, that when the scriptures say lawyer here, they’re not talking about like Perry Mason or Alan Dershowitz. No, as the New Testament speaks of lawyers, what the authors are describing are people more akin to theologians than attorneys. This particular lawyer was undoubtedly well-versed in the Jewish Purity Laws.

And you see this lawyer, he has a question. One that would’ve been right in his wheelhouse. Now, we know that he is trying to trap Jesus, trick him into some sort of punishable heresy, so the question is far from innocent. But it is one, I think, we all wonder from time-to-time:

“What shall I do to inherit eternal life?”

Now, as important as this question would seem to be, Jesus doesn’t exactly answer it, not immediately at least.

Jesus, instead, asks a couple of questions instead of answering the lawyer’s query:

“What is written in the Law? How do you read it?”

Well, you know what they say, never answer a question with a question, right? Actually, it’s a fairly good strategy when encountering someone whose thinking is in error. See, if we launch into simply telling people that they’re wrong, chances are they’ll ignore us and our information. We don’t like being corrected. But, if we figured out we’re wrong on our own accord, we’re much more likely to change our minds that we are when someone confronts us with the truth.

So, Jesus asks some questions, redirecting the line of inquiry.

The lawyer is left with an easy answer. Easy, that is, if you’re well-versed in the Jewish law. Quoting verses from Deuteronomy and Leviticus, the lawyer goes on to articulate:

“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.”

And with this, the lawyer is hoisted on his own petard, even if he doesn’t realize it. You can tell this by Jesus reply:

“You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.”

Jesus, the Bible tells us, lived without sin but here, Jesus is bordering on sarcasm as he says this. Why? Because doing all of that isn’t entirely possible, nor is it necessary. It’s kind of like saying something to the effect of, “so you think that if you jump up and down 1000 times, you’ll win the lottery? Sure man, go ahead and do it!”

But, perhaps missing the humor there, the lawyer must’ve done some mental calculations and figured he was good with all that God stuff. But, just to be sure, the lawyer wants to make certain he’s in the clear as it relates to his standing with his neighbors. After all, if getting into heaven means loving one’s neighbors as one’s self, then it helps to know who your neighbors are.

But why would someone want specificity on that?

The question itself betrays the asker in two very clear ways. First, if the lawyer’s intent to get into heaven and the only question he asks concerns greater specificity on who his neighbors is, it’s a safe assumption that he totally believes he’s good with God.

He's not, see Romans 3:23

The second inference we can draw from his question is that he's seeking not so much to determine who he is called to love like he loves himself but rather he's subtly attempting to figure out who he can EXCLUDE.

That lawyer is starting to sound a whole lot like Ming Ming, isn't he?

Now, I don't want to speak for any of y'all, but the fact of the matter is, like I said, sometime I'm a lot like Ming Ming, and I don't believe I'm alone here.

So, this lawyer, he's trying to figure out who he should help (as a means to figure out both who he's safe NOT helping) to be certain that he's done enough to get into heaven. At this point, Jesus tells a story.

And, like all the parables, it causes us to think more deeply about the richness of God's mercy and love.

In today's Scripture reading, two other people pass by the injured and dying man there on the road before the Samaritan arrives. True to the geography of the region, the trek between Jerusalem and Jericho was a long downhill stretch which made it idea for robbers to lie in wait for approaching travelers. The Scripture tells us one of the men who pass by the injured traveler is a priest, the other a Levite, a role with priestly responsibilities.

We're sure to look askance at their callousness. After all, they're willing to leave the injured traveler there on the side of the road to die.

But they think they've got a good reason for not helping.

It's that think they're good with God. Sounds like that lawyer, doesn't it?

Considering that they're Jews means that they would've thought their account balance was positive to begin with. On top of that, as a Priest and Levite, they would've been doing everything that they could just to make sure to remained in black ink with the man upstairs. Their relationship with God was solidified only by what they've done. And because they were doing or had done "enough" then there was just no need to help the wounded traveler.

So, I think we do "get" the Priest and the Levite more than perhaps any other character in the parable. Too often we operate with a similar thought-pattern. Too often we do the math, always trying account for our own salvation.

The fact of the matter is when we believe God is keeping accounts on us then more often than not act, we'll act just like Ming-Ming or the Priest or the Levite. If we think we're in the black, then we'll be overly cautious in offering assistance. We'll rarely do more than we think we need to.

But you see, the heart of the parable isn't an admonishment or even an exhortation to just do better, not really.

If all we can extract from the parable of the Good Samaritan is the need to do more good, then chances are we'll end up buying back into the very works-based righteousness which began the dialogue with Jesus to begin with as the lawyer asks "What must I DO to inherit eternal life?" And that isn't Jesus' point at all. If the point of the parable is simply "do better" than we've fallen prey to the same mindset the Jewish people of the era had.

What we need to seek of this parable is the answer to the question "why are we doing good to begin with?"

The Good News of the Gospel is that Jesus never intended his hearers to imagine themselves as the priests or the Levites. No doubt, He wanted his followers to act like the Good Samaritan *but he doesn't tell this parable entirely in order for them to "just be better people."* Jesus didn't intend for this story to be a simple morality tale wherein being the Good Samaritan in life yielded salvation.

This is a parable and parables are never as easy to understand as we first think. There's always a detail or two which just doesn't make sense. This is because parables in some way challenge our understandings of the world. Reading a parable, we're called into a story feeling confident about our beliefs only to find them flipped upside down by Christ's words.

Laborers that make the same wage whether they work just one hour or all day long? It just doesn't add up. A Father who accepts his ingrate son back into his house after he'd publicly shamed the entire family? It doesn't make sense. A Samaritan who helps a injured Jew, knowing the very person he's assisting despises him? NOT POSSIBLE.

Friends the real challenge of this parable isn't found in our daily striving to be quote-unquote Good Samaritans or to quiet the Ming-Ming within us.

The real challenge is found only when we realize that off all the characters in Christ's story, the one we're supposed to see ourselves as is the stranded traveler lying half-dead in desperate need of help!

As Jesus spoke this parable to the gathered Jews, he hoped they'd see themselves as being broken and in need of help. It's important to consider this unnamed man was just a run-of-the-mill, average, every-day Jew laying half-dead on the road there, figuratively just like the people Jesus was sharing this parable with.

The Jewish people needed help because they were living apart from God's true will while at one and the same time thinking that they were good with God as long as they JUST did what he bound them to do. That's the reason the lawyer asks the question to begin all this. "What must **I do** to inherit eternal life?" He asks. He wants to know because faithful Jews spent their lives trying to stay in the black by the labor of their hands.

But, you see, God knew his people needed assistance which they couldn't come by on their own. They couldn't do it by themselves but Help had arrived. Salvation had come for them in Jesus Christ.

The parable called the Jewish people into an alternate way of seeing things and it was as scandalous a message to the people who originally heard it as it is to us today. *It opened their eyes and invited them to see themselves in desperate need.*

Who likes to think of themselves as needy after all? Isn't that what we all work so hard just to avoid. You and I, we live in society saturated with a "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" mentality. If I were to ask you to imagine the worst possible scenario, many of us would envision having to ask strangers for help because there was just no other way out of our predicament. Just like it was back then, there's a stigma involved with being needy. At some level, it troubles us to imagine that's exactly where we are.

But Scriptures reveal that we're all wounded and broken. But thanks be to God we've been rescued. To use Paul's language from Colossians, until Christ came into our lives, we were the people held captive by the power of darkness. Thanks be to God, Christ came and transferred us into his Kingdom of Light.

We're the people who're all but dead until help comes from an entirely unexpected and unlikely source.

But Jesus Christ is as strange to this time and place as he was to the Jewish world he lived and died and was resurrected in. We laud strength and abhor weakness. We can't stand to think of ourselves as needing help from anyone. To think of salvation coming not from our minds or our hands seems laughable. That it comes even though we don't deserve it seems ludicrous. After all, we live in world where there's no such thing as a free lunch and grace seems "too good to be true."

*Too often our prudent and rational minds just simply can't grasp the two seemingly foreign concepts drawn out by this parable. First, that we're the ones in need of help. That even though we imagine ourselves to be good and upright and strong, we aren't. Not really. What we are is terribly in need of help. Second, we just can't fathom that the help we need with such urgency comes to us **not** because we've earned it but simply because we need it.*

You and I, friends, are wounded. Whether that be by the works of our own hands or by bandits along the path of life makes no real difference. And yet Christ comes to us, maybe in a grand moment with a chorus of angels or maybe he comes to us in a still-small voice and says, no matter what, I love you. You are mine.

He travels down into the deep recesses of our lives. He picks us up in our moments of sheer misery, be they self-inflicted or otherwise. Jesus carries us back to safety from the road where he anoints us with

oil. He pushes cool water up to our lips to soothe our parched throats. He nourishes us with his word and here, at his table.

Jesus Christ is the Good Samaritan.

We're the poor and wounded traveler. The church is our inn. We're just sitting here in the pews recovering from our injuries, just looking forward to the day when Jesus Christ comes back, back in the flesh so that we can finally be in the bodily presence of the one who helps us by the power of the Holy Spirit, the one who makes our healing possible.

One of my colleagues in the Doctor of Ministry program shared with us that she looked out on her church one Sunday before worship. She shared with us God gave her the ability to realize that if broken marriages caused people to wear a sling; if family dysfunction put you in a wheelchair; if addictions came with an eye-patch or depressions forced you to wear on your leg then her church would look remarkably like a M.A.S.H. unit. But that it was okay, Holy even, because they were all getting the best possible treatment for their injuries.

Friends, once we let go of believing ourselves to be the master of our own destinies and realize that we're wounded and broken, it's only then we're able to seize the alternate reality that Christ shares with us in the parable of the Good Samaritan.

We're saved by Grace alone by Jesus Christ.

And it's ONLY because of that, that we can be Good Samaritans. It's because of Grace, that we just can't help seeking Jesus out by searching for his face among the poor and the weak and the oppressed. We respond to their needs as though we were giving thanks to the one who saved us.

Robert Wuthnow, a sociologist from Princeton University studied people who'd performed great deeds of heroism in which their lives or livelihoods were jeopardized by trying to help. What he discovered in almost all of them was that they shared one commonality. They had all been the recipients of some kindness or hospitality which profoundly affected them.

Our Subway Samaritan had, for sure. After he saved the young man, Wesley Autry was interviewed extensively. Turns out, Wesley cites himself as being the recipient of many kindnesses through his life. It was his experience of protection, care, love and provision which resonated within, leading him to jump onto the tracks to save a complete stranger.

And I think that's where Jesus is trying to get folks. Us, especially.

We who have been the recipients of the greatest gift of all – salvation, are motivated to help out of gratitude. And we know two things very clearly.

We can never do enough to earn our own way into heaven.

Because of what Jesus has done for us, there is no line we can draw, no people we can choose to stop caring for.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.