

“Good Samaritan”

Psalm 46; Luke 10:25-37

July 24, 2022

Point of view makes all the difference in the world, doesn't it? I mean, sometimes, especially when differences are involved, it's a good idea to try and see situations from other people's perspectives. It's the right thing to do, after all. But today, I want us to consider the parable of the Good Samaritan.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is probably the best known parable Jesus tells followed closely by the Prodigal Son. The parable has captured imaginations since Jesus first told it. This simple tale of compassion has launched many great endeavors in helping others. Presently, in the United States alone, there are over a dozen Good Samaritan hospitals, more when you consider world-wide. So, the story moves us in a way that few others do. It motivates us with a message of unexpected compassion from a questionable stranger. But if we read this story as merely a simple tale about “doing better”, “helping more people” or just being kind, then we've extracted far too little from this very rich, very lush parable. That isn't to say that “do better” isn't a decent read on this passage but one that misses much of the point Jesus is trying to make to his listeners as well as us.

The passage begins when a lawyer stands up and asks Jesus a question. Now it's important to keep in mind, this isn't Perry Mason. You and I, when we think of lawyers, we think of Perry Mason or some other television attorney but that isn't the type of guy I'm talking about here. This lawyer that stands up to ask Jesus a question is really a theologian. These laws the man studies, well, they're God's laws. You see, this lawyer is an expert in knowing God's law – what God requires in each and every situation. That's the kind of guy he was, a theologian. And not the most genuine theologian in the world, as it turns out. We see in the description of the man that he's out to put Jesus to the test. Now, this kind of guy we know, don't we? Not of course this guy, but we know guys like them – the kind that always like to be right and are happiest when they're telling you that you're wrong. That's the kind of guy this lawyer strikes me as. He's just spending some of his time looking for a debate with Jesus to try and trip Him up. So, not that his intentions are just to learn, but, being a student in the law, the man asks a question. No, strike that. This man with a foul intent asks Jesus the biggest honking question of all-time. “What must I DO to inherit eternal life?” Is there a bigger question than that, I wonder?

Because one thing is for certain – we will all die. And that thought sits heavily upon our souls. So, we like every single person every born wonder this very questions. I look out and see that people have died and know that the reaper comes for me as well one day. But while I'm still around, is there anything I can be DOING to make certain that when I die, I continue to live on? So, it's a big question. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” he asks Jesus. Ah, but notice, Jesus doesn't answer him back but instead baits a bit of a trap. So, Jesus, likely knowing just how full of himself this man was, asks him a question in return. A question really designed to help the lawyer show off just how much he knows about God's Law. “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” Jesus inquires. Just as a side note, this is a brilliant tactic when dealing with someone who is questioning faith at an insincere level. They'll ask you things like, “do you really believe Ghandi is in hell?” but it's a trick question. They don't really want an explanation so much as they catch you saying something foolish. Instead of answering them sincerely, turn it on them, just like Jesus does with this man. Ask them, “In your opinion, should anyone be in hell?” or something like that. It trips them up, keeps them on the defensive.

So, what is written in the law? Jesus asks the theologian and HE NAILS IT. Merging Deuteronomy 6 and Leviticus 19, he identifies exactly one must do to inherit eternal life according to the Law. But I wonder, as the man was answering, if an uneasy feeling started creeping into his bones. I can't help but wonder if he got the sense that something wasn't quite right in the state of Denmark. You see, there's a bit of unease now in what he's said. Now, he's probably sure he's got the loving God part but, this neighbor business, probably needs a little more clarity. After all, this is the biggest question of them all, no sense in not asking a follow-up question of two.

So, the man asks, essentially, who then is my neighbor? Great question, right? After all, if part of your eternal life is bound up in how you treat your neighbors, you're going to want to identify exactly who your neighbors are. It's at this point that Jesus tells the parable. It goes like this – “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. 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. But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. 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. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.'"

Now this story is as rich as it is brief. Every single detail is attended to. This would've been a very accessible and believable story to the original audience. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was a popular one, a 17-mile trek through hills and mountains with plenty of caves. The twisting downhill route and ample hiding places made it an idea haunt for bandits. It wasn't uncommon for this very thing to happen to an unfortunate traveler. But it isn't so much a story about a robbed man as it is a story about response to that man's need. Lying half-dead in a ditch, the man is absolutely incapable of assisting himself. In fact, without intervention, it seems as though the man will expire. Thankfully though, coming down the road is a priest. Now, keep in mind, priests were big deals back in the day. They were respected and trusted by the people as being duly chosen representatives of God. Thank goodness for this injured man a priest is coming. He'll certainly help this dying man. But...NO! The Priest doesn't stop, just crosses the road and keeps on trucking. Next comes a Levite. Now, a Levite was a temple assistant. Like an associate pastor in a way. They were in charge of maintenance, cleaning, doing small acts of ministry. Still, very respected and would know just what to do in this situation. But then, NO again. The Levite passes by without so much as a hello or an inquiry into the need for assistance.

It's funny, some enterprising social psychologist set up an experiment to determine people's willingness to help out when they themselves are under time stress. So, this group tested whether people would delay their progress in order to help someone in need if it meant they'd be late to an important meeting. Guess who was the worst? Pastors to be on their way to preaching class, that's whom. So, this isn't such an implausible example, so to speak.

There are reasons why these two religious figures may not have helped. Perhaps they were worried about ritual uncleanness that they'd encounter if the man died. It could've been the case that their reluctance was easier to understand than that. Maybe they were just scared. After all, those robbers might not be too far off and might just like the opportunity to rob a priest or a Levite. Whatever their reasons are, they're not mentioned in the text but their apathy towards the man's plight is equally telling. If the story has seemed odd up to this point, after all, why didn't the priests help, it's about to take a turn to the outré.

Because the next man down the road happens to be a Samaritan. Look, we think of Samaritans, we think of good ones. Back in Jesus' day, this would've been far, far from the case. You see, the Samaritans were despised by the Jews which is funny because, literally speaking, they're kissing cousins. You see, when the Northern Kingdom of Israel was destroyed by the Assyrians, large parts of the population were carted off in exile. Other peoples from the empire were brought in. Those Gentiles through the years interbred with the local Jews. So, the Jews thought of them as unclean and apostates, really. For they'd set up worship on Mount Gerizim in opposition to the Temple in Jerusalem.

The rivalry between Jews and Samaritans was more than just words. At times, even during the life of Jesus, there were violent confrontations and even a massacre or two. To say that there was bad blood between these two groups is saying the absolute least. So, when this Samaritan arrives on the scene, the listeners would've expected him to pass by as well. But, well, he doesn't. In fact, the compassion the Samaritan shows is lavish. First, taking his own supplies of wine and oil, the Samaritan binds the wounded traveler's wounds. Then, he sets the man on his own animal to take him out of that place. Now notice, placing him on the animal means that he's now walking this difficult terrain. But his care is even more lavish than that. He takes the wounded man to an inn, pays for his care. Before leaving, the Samaritan ensures that the care for this wounded man will be continued at his own expense. This care was lavish, wonderful, compassionate and costly. I mean, who knows how long this man's injuries will take to heal.

It's at this point, after telling his tale, that Jesus returns to ask another question. "Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" The lawyer, he's beaten at this point. Mess with the bull, get the horns and all that. He won't even deign to say "Samaritan" instead saying, "the one that showed compassion." The one who showed compassion is the one who is being a good neighbor." At this point, the lawyer? His goose is cooked. Because the implications of what is being said are staggering.

Remember, the man started this whole ball of wax rolling by asking “What must I DO to inherit eternal life?” Now, the answer is plain. According to the Law, you’ve got to go above and beyond what anyone would consider reasonable care for anyone you encounter...even a despised Samaritan. Well, the implications are clear. It can’t be done!

That’s right. I’m here to tell you, if you set out to inherit eternal life by loving God body, mind and soul and loving neighbors just as the Good Samaritan does, you’ll be on a fool’s errand. It can’t be done. But, then again, it seems foolish to get bogged down with the second part, loving neighbors as ourselves. But what about that first part. Do we love God entirely, body mind and soul all the time?

I can fairly well state for the record that as I was stuck in Atlanta traffic trying to get to the game, I wasn’t all about God body mind and soul and that was on a pretty good day, when I consider it. The fact of the matter is that we should’ve gotten a sense that the lawyer was off base when he asked the question, “What must I DO to inherit eternal life.” Inheritance isn’t an earned position, not when you think about it fully. You don’t inherit something because you’ve worked for it. No, you inherit something as a windfall of the relationship you had with the person. It’s a gift, not a wage.

You see, this lawyer, he was pretty confident in himself. After all, he knew and studied and presumably followed the Law. Just like the rich young ruler who approaches Jesus with the same question in the Gospel of Matthew, they want to make sure they’re doing it right. When it’s as weighty a matter as eternal life, its worth the effort.

I began this sermon wondering about point of view and now I want to return our attention there. Where do you locate yourself in the story? Perhaps you’re the Good Samaritan. That’s not impossible. There are lots of compassionate people out there and I don’t want to dissuade any of you. But are you really that Good? Would you do this for a stranger? Probably not if you’re honest about it. Maybe we can relate with the Levite and the Priest. Far too many times I confess I’ve known of need and turned a deaf ear to it and I’m pretty sure you have as well. And while it’s better for our faith to view ourselves as the Priest or the Levite in the story, it just doesn’t quite add up. No, the point of the parable is found when we discover our real point-of-view. You see, we’re the man in the ditch, really.

Dead in our sins, we once lay in metaphorically the same exact spot. Sin had rendered us sick to the point of exhaustion. We were no longer able to help ourselves. But that’s when Jesus, our GREAT SAMARITAN came forward. Once, we were in the dark but now we stand in the great and irrepressible light of our Lord Jesus Christ. He came into our hearts, bound our wounds, carried us lovingly here, to church, to our inn when we were placed in ongoing care.

And yes, we are healed, and, yes, we can be like the Good Samaritan to others at points along the way in response to God’s love first shared with us.

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