

"Who Is My Neighbor" – July 14, 2019 – Luke 10:25-37

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The parable that Jesus shared in this lesson from Luke's gospel is so well-known that the words "Good Samaritan" have become a part of our lexicon. And even if you are not familiar with the parable itself, you perhaps have learned that if someone is called a Good Samaritan, it refers to the act of stopping to help someone in a tragic situation. According to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary, a Good Samaritan is a person who helps other people and especially strangers when they have trouble. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Good%20Samaritan#h1> The legal definition of Good Samaritan refers to "one who voluntarily renders aid to another in distress although under no duty to do so." Many countries have Good Samaritan laws which offer some type of legal protection to people, who want to offer help to someone, but are afraid they might be sued after the fact. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Good_Samaritan_law#cite_note-25

In the passage from Luke, a lawyer, a person well-versed in the Jewish Torah, or law, has posed a question to Jesus. He wants to know what he has to do to inherit eternal life. Knowing that the man is a scholar, Jesus asks him, what does it say in the law? You know the law, you tell me what it says. And so the lawyer responds with a passages from Deuteronomy and Leviticus, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and will all your might; and your neighbor as yourself." Jesus responds that he is correct. If he does this, he will live. But that's not the real question. The lawyer really wants to know, who is my neighbor? He wants to know how Jesus responds to that question.

According to early Judaism, neighbors were fellow Jews. If someone was from another nation, they were referred to as strangers. The difference between neighbor and stranger was an important distinction. Jesus was a Jew, so he understood that distinction, and so the parable he tells is quite surprising to his hearers.

So Jesus tells the story of a traveler who is out on the road between Jerusalem and Jericho and is attacked by robbers. A priest comes down the road, sees him, but passes on by. Then a Levite comes down the road, sees him, but he too passes by. The next person in the story should be an Israelite – that's what the hearers were expecting. According to biblical scholars Sandy Sasso and Amy-Jill Levine, early Jews were lumped into one of three groups – priests, Levites, and Israelites. So when Jesus started by mentioning a priest, then a Levite, the listeners would expect him to mention an Israelite next. But he doesn't; he mentions a Samaritan. ("Who Is My Neighbor?" 2019)

This is a shock. Samaritans were considered the enemy. There was nothing good about them. They claimed to follow God, but their traditions, scriptures and customs were different from the Jews. Jews didn't like Samaritans, and Samaritans didn't like Jews. The listeners would have been surprised that the priest and Levite failed to help. They would have been more surprised that it was the Samaritan who DID stop to help. And the Samaritan doesn't simply stop. He goes way out of his way to make sure the injured person receives extensive care.

It's an interesting and scandalous twist. The lawyer asked the question to Jesus, who is my neighbor. But Jesus reframed the question. He asks, "Which of the three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man attacked by the robbers?" Of course, the lawyer has no recourse but to answer that it was the third man, the Samaritan. No doubt about it. But because of the animosity that Jews held toward Samaritans, he can't even say the name out loud. Instead, the lawyer replies, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus tells him – Go and do likewise.

In Leviticus we read that we should love our neighbor as ourselves. But Leviticus also says, "the stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the homeborn among you; you should love the stranger as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." Differences may always remain between neighbors and strangers – strangers might look differently, believe differently, think differently, act differently than neighbors do - but love must be shown to them both. When it comes to how we are to treat one another, Jesus makes no distinction between neighbors and strangers. Showing compassion, showing mercy, showing love is always the right way to act.

Another way of thinking about this parable is to consider yourself as the one down in that ditch, beaten and bloody, in desperate need of help. Is there anyone from whom we would be aghast to receive help? What type of person would you find yourself recoiling from? Or from what group of people might you be afraid? Think of someone whose very presence would cause your stomach to knot up, your muscles tighten, your emotions to explode with fear or hatred. Then, imagine yourself receiving life-giving help from that person or group. That is how scandalous this parable is. That is how scandalous Jesus' message is.

Mercy and love see no barriers between people. There are no strangers when it comes to showing mercy – compassion is to be given to the one in need of compassion without regard to things that separate us from one another. May we go and do likewise.