

May 26

The Good Samaritan

Luke 10: 25-37

The Story of the Good Samaritan has so many layers of meaning. Unfortunately, we often simplify it down to an easy truism; we are to be nice to everyone. There is so much more, nuances Jesus' listeners would have grasped, but we might miss. Today we are going to spend a little time looking at some of the more "hidden" gems of wisdom contained in the story.

The lawyer's question, which began our reading, should be everyone's question. What must I do to gain eternal life? In this setting "eternal life" refers not to individual survival in an afterlife, but how to participation in the reign of God even today. It is a question that Jesus strives to answer thoughtfully. He realized this man was seeking truth and not someone trying to lay a trap. In response, Jesus says that love for God, entering into and living now in the Kingdom of God, is incomplete until one loves their neighbor. Love for God creates a community of neighbors who practice love for one another. Too often, we think of faith on an individual basis. We hear this question as, "What must I do to get into heaven?" Jesus moves the conversation away from individual needs and goals to a corporate way of living our faith. We should, at the start of every day ask, "What must I do today to gain eternal life?" And, at the end of the day ask, "How well did I live that goal today?" We pray with the understanding that to gain entry today into the kingdom is to love God and others.

The lawyer, in asking a follow up question "Who is my neighbor?," wants to know whom to love in order to be included in the rule of God. There is an explicit assumption in his question that he does not need to love everyone. Here is where we need to remember who was listening to Jesus. They had been told from birth that they were the chosen people of God. Often, rabbis had said that the Ten Commandments and many of the laws in Leviticus were given to remind Jews how they were to treat one another. There was an implicit understanding that there were "us and them." The Jews were the "us" and the "them's" were Gentiles and you did not have to treat them in the same way as you treated your fellow Jews. The Lawyer was asking Jesus to confirm this traditional understanding of neighbor.

Jesus reframes the question by making him, those listening, and ultimately us, consider a different question: “Who exercises neighbor love and therefore is included in the dominion of God?” Jesus’ point is that anyone is part of the Kingdom of God if they are acting in a neighborly way to others. That is still a hard truth for us to accept. We want statements of belief to come first. Jesus is proposing a much broader and more fluid understanding. Jesus wants us to see that any person at any given time, if they are acting in the ways God asks us to act are, at least for that moment, part of the Kingdom.

A Samaritan was not considered a Gentile but something almost worse, a heretic believer. The Samaritans saw themselves as the true worshipers of the One God. They believe their Temple on Mount Gerizim was the original holy site. They trace their beginnings to the time of the divided nation of Judah. There had been squabbles over where you worship the one true God and whose holy scriptures and beliefs were the correct ones. This had led to arguments, wars and a general loathing between the two groups. Yet, in the story a despised Samaritan, with all of these wrong beliefs, was lifted up as being neighborly, living into the realm of God on earth because, in that moment, he was loving others and, in so doing, showing love for God. Think about what this means today and how many barriers we erect between “us” and “them” instead of seeing where the love of God is being lived out.

I want to spend a few minutes on the priest and the Levite. There are nuances here that we also miss. We tend to put down the priest and Levite as uncaring oafs. As you might imagine, there is a greater complexity to their situation that the hearers would have grasped. These two men likely lived in Jericho and were headed to Jerusalem to perform their regular services at the temple. You served for a prescribed set of time at the temple and then lived other places than Jerusalem the rest of the year. If a priest or Levite touched a corpse that was not a direct relative, this would defile them. To be made clean they would then have to go through a complex and expensive purification process. During that time the priest and Levite have no income from the temple and so consequently their families are left vulnerable. The priest and Levite are caught between love for God as expressed through obedience to the law and the practical expression of love for a neighbor. The text says that the victim is half-dead but from a distance he

may look dead or about to die. They passed by to keep themselves pure for service to God when, through the parable Jesus is saying that true service to God is right in front of them. Serving another through compassion is more important than serving God in a religious sense.

When we begin to think about this we have to ask ourselves, “Where have we let ‘bigger considerations’ get in the way of our faithfully being a neighbor?” I think this is something Jesus would want us to ponder.

Let me give you a brief example. In one of the communities I served it was a well-known fact that each summer before an election we would have all the politicians asking if they could come by and help hand out food at the food bank. They always brought along someone to take their picture. They wanted to show their concern for the poor. Yet, when some of us on that same food bank board went to the county commissioners for resources to keep the food bank open for those same poor we usually heard that they would have to take it under advisement. We were reminded that it was a small county, there were so many needs, and so forth. One of the commissioners mentioned to me that he really wanted to help but if people thought he was too free in “giving away” county money to people who didn’t really contribute he wouldn’t get re-elected

One more nuanced part of the story we miss. Many ancient stories involve three characters; the third is usually the hero. The listeners would have expected a regular Israelite to be next and the story’s hero. They would have been stunned to hear it was a Samaritan and even more stunned when they see how graciously he treated this man in need. It makes me think about people who we would be stunned to hear as the hero of such a story.

Recently, I came across a story of three young men befriending an older woman. This took place in the south, the men are black and she is white. The men were at their favorite restaurant when she comes in, gets her order and sits down at a table alone. One of the young men is bothered about this. Later, in an interview he said, “No one should have to eat alone.” He picked up his tray and goes over to her table and asks if she would like some company. She admitted to being a bit wary, at first, but she was

feeling lonely so agreed. Soon his two companions joined them and, before long, they were laughing and having a great time getting to know each other. They decided to meet again in a week for dinner. It has turned into a weekly routine. They love her stories about the past, and she listens to what they are going through. She gives them some advice, and they stop by her house and help with a few odd chores. The only time they ever had a disagreement was when she offered to buy their meal or pay them for the work they had done. They told her, friends don't act that way. Someone noticed this friendship and told the television station who featured it. It has been going around social media. The sad part of this is that it is seen as news because it is so rare. This is how we all should live.

We don't know why a Samaritan would be on this road. Usually they never were in Judea and rarely entered Jerusalem. Yet he was on the road. I like to think that perhaps he stopped because he knew what it was like to be passed by because of prejudice. By taking care of him, putting him on his donkey and leading him to an inn, he embodies the concept of servant.

Jesus' command at the end to "Go" makes the story an example of what we should all do. It also challenges all our narrow prejudices and tribal boundaries. In Luke, Jesus' final commission to the disciples was to witness in all Judea, Samaria and to the end of the earth. We were to act like the Good Samaritan.

What must we do to inherit eternal life? We are called to love God by loving all of our neighbors not just those like us. We are to create a community of love and grace where all are welcomed, cared about and no one is passed by or we think of passing them by because we value our concerns more than their need. It is hard to live this vision, but it what Jesus commands us to do.