

“Neighboring” GPPC 7-14-19
Psalm 82, Luke 10:25-37

The story sometimes called “The Parable of the Good Samaritan” is only found in Luke’s gospel. Notice what sets the story in motion. A lawyer stands up to test Jesus. Now by the word “lawyer” here, we mean someone of the time who is an expert on Jewish law. Luke says this person stands up not to learn from Jesus (who’s also a Jew) or to engage in constructive dialogue with Jesus but to test him, basically to try to trip him up. “Teacher,” he asks, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

And rather than answer his question straight-on, Jesus sends the lawyer back to the same scripture he’s supposed to be an expert about. Jesus says, “So what’s written in the law? What do you read there?”

And the man answers by quoting and combining two well-known passages, one from Deuteronomy and the other from Leviticus, “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.”

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Professor Jesus says to the man, “Right answer! Do this and you’ll live.” This lawyer is doing well. He knows his stuff. He passed the Bible Content Ordination Exam on the first try.

But he just doesn’t quite know when to stop talking. Luke says the man wants to “justify himself.” He wants to prove that he’s in the right, show that he’s in good shape with God and people. So he asks one more question. “And *who* is my neighbor?”

And honestly that seems like a fair enough question, doesn’t it? *Who* exactly constitutes a neighbor? Somebody living next door? Across town? In another state? Another country? Scan the internet, Facebook, TV, newspapers, you name it. It just seems like we have an unending supply of neighbors. How in the world do we limit this, because it feels overwhelming sometimes, doesn’t it?

Well, Jesus doesn’t answer the man’s question with a neat and simple definition. Instead, as he so often does, Jesus tells a story as an answer. It’s a story many of us know and have heard many times, maybe so many times that we miss how radical the story actually is. So we listen again for God speaking anew.

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Jesus says a man's traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho. It's an area known to be frequented by robbers. And sure enough robbers get the man and not only do they rob him but they strip him and beat him and leave him half dead. They add unnecessary and intentional cruelty to their robbery, if you can imagine people adding unnecessary and intentional cruelty to innocent people.

A religious person, a priest, is walking down the road and sees the man, but "the Rev" walks on by on the other side of the road.

Then another religious person, a Levite, walks down the road, sees the man, but also walks on by on the other side of the road.

But then there is this traveling Samaritan. This *Samaritan*. As soon as Jesus says the word "Samaritan," Jews of the time recoil, because Jews and Samaritans hate each other. There is an ugly history between the groups. They look down upon each other. And they avoid each other.

This Samaritan sees the man, but he does not pass by on the other side. Instead, he comes near, looks at the man, and Luke says he is moved with pity. The Greek word used here is one of my favorite words in the entire Bible. It's related to our entrails, our innards. It basically

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means to have gut-wrenching compassion for somebody. Have you ever felt that kind of compassion for another human being, compassion so deep you actually felt it in your body? Have you? Has anybody ever felt that kind of compassion for you?

The Samaritan not only feels this gut-wrenching compassion but he *does* something concrete about it. He takes action. Notice three things about how he acts. First, he goes and bandages the man's wounds and pours wine and oil on them (an ancient kind of medicine). Then he puts the man on his own animal and takes him to an inn and takes care of him. So the Samaritan does something "hands on" and immediate. He does not wait for a committee to form a policy statement and run it by the governing body. He does something "hands on" and right away.

Second, the next day the Samaritan gives the innkeeper two days' wages with instructions to care for the man until he comes back, and with the promise to reimburse him for any extra care needed. So the Samaritan doesn't just do something that's helpful in the short-term, he also does something to help the man for the long-term.

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And third, both of these actions cost the Samaritan something—time, energy, and money. There’s also a risk. What if the bandits had been waiting to ambush the Samaritan when he went to help the man? And here’s a kicker. What if the man himself had rejected the Samaritan’s help? After all, some New Testament scholars say the real shock in the story is that with the bad blood between Jews and Samaritans of the time, the man who’d been robbed, stripped, and beaten might’ve said, “I’d rather die than be helped by the likes of you.” (See Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus*, 144-149.) Helping people who are need is complicated, isn’t it?

About ten years ago, when Beth and I were living in Ohio, I went for a run on the road out in the rolling countryside on a hot summer morning. As I recall, I was running maybe five miles, an out and back route. I was out a few miles when I greeted and passed a young woman wearing a green U.S. Army T-shirt, and walking the opposite direction. We waved and said hello to each other. Coming back I passed her again, and it’s *possible* that I sped up a little bit as I went by. And if that’s true,

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it simply confirms the adage that, “You can’t be young forever, but you can always be immature.”

So I was coming down a small hill at a pretty good pace when I felt and *heard* a pop the lower calf of one of my legs. There was some pain, but not too bad. However, I’d lost almost all power in the lower part of that leg and I couldn’t run anymore. So I just starting limping home, but I still probably had a mile and half to go in the heat. The U.S. Army t-shirt woman caught up with me and asked if she could help. I asked if she had a cellphone. Nope. So she wished me well, and walked on by. And I kept limping toward home.

But then a guy with his wife and kids in a big black pick-up truck pulled up and the guy opened the door.

“You hurt your leg?”

“Yeah, I think I tore a calf muscle.”

“Get in and I’ll drive you home.”

“No. I’m sweating like a pig and I’ll ruin your upholstery. Can you just call my wife?”

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“That’s okay,” he said. “We’re going to soccer. We’ll put a towel down.”

So the man helped me into the truck and his wife and kids crammed into the back and I sat in the front, dripping sweat, and sharing what Beth claims is a rather unpleasant fragrance. The guy drove me home. Went to the front door and got Beth who helped me limp into the house. The man told us he was a physical therapist at the hospital. His name was Paul. He recommended I see a doctor. I did (partially torn calf muscle). We said thank you. That was it. I never saw him again.

Have you ever been cared for by a Good Samaritan? Have you ever *been* that Good Samaritan?

At least part of what we’re doing as a church is asking God to form our members into good Samaritans who help people in need. As we worship God, as we study the Bible and the great issues of our day, as we pray, as we meet in committees and plan, we are asking God to form us into good Samaritans. And little Garrett who was just baptized today doesn’t know it yet, but that’s what we’re hoping to do with him too.

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Now that does not mean just handing people money. Many times over the years people have come to the church and asked for money. But we don't keep money here to give out, and unless I give them a couple of bucks out of my wallet (rarely), I don't give them money. Sometimes the people asking for money will complain and say, "I thought you were a church and you're supposed to help people." "Yes," I say, "We *are* a church, and we do help people, but we don't just hand out money."

Instead, we give money to Greensboro Urban Ministry, Triad Health Project, Faith Action International House, other organizations, and they distribute money to landlords and utility companies. And sometimes they contact us and we send the money directly to those landlords and utility companies ourselves. We believe we are responding to immediate needs in a wise and compassionate way.

But we're also thinking long-term. So we teach our children and youth about being good Samaritans as a Christian lifestyle, a way of following Christ as Lord. We give away tens of thousands of dollars in mission money to help people in other countries and in the U.S. We study and respond to government policies that help or hurt people in

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need, and we speak to our elected representatives. And we invest money in our Guilford Park Guys Program that is helping get at-risk boys out of poverty and into jobs or college or the military. And in the fall we plan to add a Guilford Park Girls Program. This is about following the lead of the Good Samaritan responding not just to immediate needs but long-term as well.

Why do we do these things and more? Go back to the lawyer's first question to Jesus. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" We don't do these things in order to get God to love us, or so we'll receive eternal life when we die. No. Heaven and God's love are freely given, not earned.

But we do these things because they are the right things for followers of Jesus to do. And when we do them, even if they are difficult, risky, costly, and irritating, we begin to get a taste of eternal life right now. When we do these things, we get to experience the privilege of God working in and through us to love the world. How wonderful is that?

Now you know what to do, don't you? Like the Samaritan, *prove* to be a neighbor. "Go and do likewise." Amen. ©Jeff Paschal