

“Whose Neighbor Am I?”  
Rev. Eric. S. Corbin  
First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois  
July 10, 2016

Luke 10:25-37

This parable just might be the best known parable of Jesus. Pretty much everyone knows this story, whether they are Christian or not, whether they have ever stepped foot into a church or not. It is a part of popular culture, and has been over the centuries. The parable was one of the most popular in medieval art. Rembrandt, van Gogh, and a whole host of other artists depicted this scene in their work. Official government currency has been made with this scene on it. Poets like Longfellow have written works about it. References to this parable show up in modern films and TV shows. There are so-called “Good Samaritan” laws prevalent in our country and others, providing protection for people who choose to help someone. There are also several charities and hospitals named after the “Good Samaritan.” The concept shows up in TV shows, movies, and books. It comes up in conversation fairly often. This truly is a parable with which most people are familiar.

And all of these references from culture draw on the idea of someone helping someone else, usually a stranger. Unfortunately, we sometimes hear the phrase “Good Samaritan” when none actually appears. Sometimes, there is no one who stops to help, and we bemoan the lack of a “Good Samaritan” to render aid.

Other times, though, someone does show up and provide aid, and the news stories inevitably call that person a “Good Samaritan.” This past week in Chicago, an elderly couple were victims of an armed robbery. The robber took off running with the woman’s purse, but the news story says a “Good Samaritan” tackled the robber and held him down until police arrived.<sup>1</sup> Also last week, a news report described a New Hampshire taxi driver as a “Good Samaritan” after he

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://abc7chicago.com/news/good-samaritan-helps-arrest-gold-coast-armed-robbery-suspect/1414593/>

turned in a large sum of money left in his cab.<sup>2</sup> A friend of mine posted on Facebook that a “Good Samaritan” had mowed his yard while he was away from home. A few years ago, I even saw a story of a man described as a “Good Samaritan” for neatly folding an American flag which had fallen to the ground when a storm knocked down a flagpole.<sup>3</sup>

In our culture, a “Good Samaritan” is someone who comes to the aid of someone (or maybe even *something*). And lending aid is a good thing. It is a wonderful thing which too often is not done. I am always glad to hear stories of someone rendering aid to someone else. One dictionary says this about the term Good Samaritan: it “now applies to any charitable person, especially one who, like the man in the parable, rescues or helps out a needy stranger.”<sup>4</sup>

But that’s not what Jesus said in this parable. We need to go back a little bit in this story. There’s quite a bit of history to what a Samaritan was in this story. There was no love lost between the Jews and the Samaritans and this feud had gone on for over six hundred years. At one point, the Jews actually destroyed the temple of the Samaritans. The Samaritans once defiled the Jewish temple. Both groups claimed to follow the Torah, but each had different copies of it and each claimed theirs to be the authentic one. There were religious and political issues. Each group sided with the enemies of the other group. It was pure *hatred* on each side.

When Jesus told this parable, there was an anti-clerical and anti-institutional feeling among many in the countryside. When Jesus said that the priest didn’t offer help and the Levite didn’t offer help, most of the crowd wouldn’t have been too surprised. “That figures,” they might have said. But there may have been good reasons for them not to have helped. These religious figures could have been fearful for their own lives. This road from Jericho to Jerusalem was very dangerous. It had the nickname of “Bloody Way.” The elevation dropped 3000 feet in eighteen miles. There were rocks everywhere behind which criminals often hid. Many were robbed and

---

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.nh1.com/news/good-samaritan-taxi-driver-returned-homeless-man-s-backpack-with-187-000-inside/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.foxnews.com/us/2010/07/07/people-search-way-donate-homeless-man-saves-flag/>

<sup>4</sup> Dictionary of Classical, Biblical, and Literary Allusions

murder was common. Sometimes, thieves lay on the road and pretended to be injured, so that they could attack someone who stopped to help them. So, when the priest and the Levite each saw this man lying there, they might have believed this to be a trap and so they passed on by. Or, if this was a legitimately injured man, he was described as “half dead” so he may have appeared to actually be dead, and if a Jew touched a dead person, they were ritually unclean for a week. A priest could not do his job if he were ritually unclean. So, perhaps these religious leaders thought the man was already dead, so they couldn’t help him, and just by touching him, they would then be unable to serve their community for a week. I’m not saying these reasons excuse the priest and the Levite, but perhaps they explain a bit about why they would not stop.

So, the crowd knows in this parable of Jesus’ that there’s got to be a third person, and that third person will stop to help. This story has got to have a happy ending. Some ordinary Israelite, a simple farmer or worker, will come along and be the hero of the story. I don’t believe we can adequately understand their level of shock – and likely disgust – when Jesus makes the hero of the story not some ordinary Jew like them, but one of their worst enemies. It just wasn’t right at all! How could Jesus do that to them? Their jaws had to drop wide open. The man who asked the original question, “who is my neighbor?” is now asked by Jesus, “so, who was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” The possible answers are “the priest,” “the Levite,” or “the Samaritan,” but the man cannot bear to even utter the word “Samaritan” in answer to Jesus’ question. He cannot even let that word cross his lips when Jesus asks “who is the neighbor?” and so he replies, “the *one* who showed him mercy.” The one who showed him mercy was not at all who the crowd expected. It was the exact opposite of who they expected. It was their worst enemy.

When we say that a “Good Samaritan” is simply someone who helps someone else, we are losing this crucial dimension of the story. When we leave out the fact that the hero was someone who was despised, we miss what Jesus is teaching us.

But a “Samaritan”? That doesn’t mean anything to us. We don’t feel what the Israelites felt when Jesus told the story. What if for you lovers of Shakespeare, we say that the two groups are the Montagues and the Capulets? Most of you remember Romeo and Juliet, right? They are star-crossed lovers, unable to actually be together because their families are mortal enemies. What if the man who is injured is a Montague and the man who rescues him is a Capulet? Or what if the injured one is a Jew and the rescuer is member of Hamas? What if the injured one is a gay Latino from Orlando and the rescuer is a member of ISIS? *That* is the kind of understanding Jesus is trying to get across when he tells this story. We have tamed it to mean so much less than Jesus intended.

Being a “Good Samaritan” doesn’t simply mean to help someone whose car is broken down on the side of the road. What Jesus is saying here is that we have to expand our definition of neighbor *far* beyond anything we ever imagined. The expert in the law who quizzed Jesus asked “who is my neighbor?” He asked this after correctly quoting that scripture says you must love your neighbor as yourself. As we talked about last month, we have a tendency to look to the rules as a limit on what we should do. This man wanted a clear limit to his responsibility. At what point am I no longer liable for what happens to someone? He was hoping for an answer like “all faithful Jews” – *they* are your neighbors. Everyone else, they are out. In fact, this was the understanding of the day. When he says that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves, he is quoting from the second part of Leviticus 19:18. The *first* part, however, says “You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons *of your own people...*” It finishes with “you shall love your neighbor as yourself” but the clear intention is that your “neighbor” is someone of your own kind. This is what he wanted Jesus to affirm. *I’ll love my neighbor and my neighbor is someone like me, right, Jesus?*

Jesus doesn’t answer the question, though. He instead tells this story that shows that there are no limits to our responsibility to others. We don’t show love only to those who are like us,

who act like us, who believe like us. We don't define how we respond in relation to who the other person is. We don't show love to one group and not to another. If we do, we are not showing the love of God. We don't give the bare minimum – whether it is love or assistance or money – in order to soothe our guilty consciences. We are to love in the same way that God does – and that is indiscriminately. We are to give our love and our time and our resources and our aid to whoever needs them, not calculating their relative worthiness, but instead reflecting God's love for *all* of God's children.

Martin Luther King, Jr. loved this parable. He spoke about it in his last sermon before his assassination. He talked about how the priest and the Levite might have feared for their safety and said this: "And so the first question that the priest asked, the first question that the Levite asked was, 'If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?' But then the Good Samaritan came by, and he reversed the question: 'If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?'" The lawyer wanted to know, "who is *my* neighbor?" Jesus instead told him, "*you are everyone's* neighbor."

Just over twenty years ago, there was a KKK rally in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The progressive university town was not welcoming to the Klan and there was a very large protest to the KKK's rally. Protesters greatly outnumbered the Klan and its supporters. At one point, a woman with a megaphone shouted "There's a Klansman in the crowd." The crowd turned to see a white man who was wearing a Confederate flag t-shirt and had a SS tattoo on his arm. Shouts of "Kill the Nazi" rang out and he began to run, but was knocked to the ground, where a group surrounded him, kicking him and hitting him with the wooden sticks of their protest signs. Mob mentality took over. In the midst of this scene, Keshia Thomas, an 18 year-old African-American student, broke out from the crowd and threw herself on top of this man, shielding him from the blows. Mark Brunner, a student photographer who took the widely shared photo, said "She put herself at

physical risk to protect someone who, in my opinion, would not have done the same for her. Who does that in this world?”<sup>5</sup>

That’s the level of discord that Jesus invites us into when he tells this parable. Keshia Thomas saw a neighbor in someone who she could rightfully have considered her enemy, and she granted him mercy. The man she protected did not speak to any reporters in the 20 years since the incident, and passed away a few months ago, so we cannot know for sure his motives that day, but we might guess that he would not have gone to Keshia’s rescue if the tables were turned.

Jesus told devout Jews that a member of their most hated group was more of a neighbor than a priest or Levite. It is not just about helping someone who has been victim of a robbery. It is about expanding who we will love, who we will serve. When we search for limits to our love, Jesus reminds us there should be no limits. We are to reflect God’s love for all. We are to respond in that love to all. There is no “Us” and “Them.” We are *all* God’s children. We are all *undeserving* of the love that God bestows equally on us all. And we are all called to respond like that character in this story who bound up the wounds and paid for the care of a person who everyone said was supposed to be his enemy. We are to respond likewise by working against systems of injustice and inequality which perpetuate harm to God’s children. We provide short-term aid, while also working on long-term change, resisting the call of those who would build barriers to justice for *all* in our society, but particularly for those in greatest need. We fight against xenophobia and instead work together, hand in hand and side by side, for the good of all of God’s people, even when doing so could put us at some risk.

The expert in the law asked “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus turned it around and asked who was the neighbor in the story. And it was obvious to all that the neighbor was the one who ignored society’s rules about who he was supposed to hate and took care of a child of God in need. And Jesus said “Go and do likewise.” Whose neighbor am I, Jesus?

---

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-24653643>