

“The Parable of the ‘Good’ Samaritan”

Luke 10:25-37

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This morning I want to explore the players in this amazing story.

The Lawyer The lawyer in this story is keenly interested in making sure Jesus’ interpretation of the Law/the Torah is correct. In Luke, Jesus isn’t so much interested in dead ritual but in lively praxis. *How do I inherit eternal life?* Jesus asks the lawyer what the law says, and the lawyer quotes Deuteronomy 6 (Love God with all your heart, soul, and might) and Leviticus 19 (Love neighbor as self). Jesus says, “You’re correct. Now, do it.”

Jesus isn’t interested only in talking about the law but in doing it.

Jesus There is much we can say about Jesus, but today let’s say that Jesus is the man who goes the wrong way. Jesus is the one who takes the wrong path. My friend Furman Buchanan puts it this way:

There are two ways to get to Jerusalem. There is the *right* way, which requires taking a *left* just south of the Galilean Lake and tracing a path through the Jordan River Valley. And then there is the *wrong* way, hanging a *right* below the lake and going down through the Samaritan villages. Not surprisingly, Jesus took the wrong way.

I say it is not surprising because Jesus is the pioneer who always takes the road less traveled. Jesus is the prophet who always crosses man-made boundaries. Jesus is the teacher who always challenges prejudices. Jesus is the savior who always calls us to follow him on a pathway of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

So, we should not be surprised that the One who perfectly reveals the fruit of God’s Holy Spirit seems out of step with our well-worn pathways of division, our man-made boundaries of exclusion, and our prejudices against those who don’t look, think or act like we do.

The Samaritan Jesus is telling his story primarily to good Jews. And every good Jew would have problems with any Samaritan, particularly a Samaritan who is about to become the hero of one of Jesus’ stories.

The origins of the Samaritans are confusing. Samaritans were probably immigrants brought into the Northern Kingdom by Assyrians. These immigrants and members of the “lost ten tribes” of Israel intermarried. They were Jews, but were seen by southern Jews as impure.¹

The Samaritans established worship centers in places other than Jerusalem—first Shiloh, then Mt. Gerazim. This infuriated Jews.

When the Persians ruled the Near East, it is said they favored the Samaritans over the Jews. This infuriated the Jews. It was advantageous for the Persians that the Jews and Samaritans were always at odds

¹ *The New Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible*, 2009, Abingdon Press: Nashville.

with each other; if Jews and Samaritans used up all their energy hating one another, they had less energy to rebel against Persia.

These hatreds and divisions were kept alive over centuries. Jews and Samaritans—readers of the same Bible—were persecuted by Persians, Greeks, and Romans, and yet they still hated one another. Later, Jews and Samaritans were persecuted by Muslims and Christians, but they (Jews and Samaritans) still spent considerable energy bad-mouthing and generally hating one another.

This story of what became known as the “Good Samaritan” upset Jesus’ listeners, many of whom may have believe that the only “good” Samaritan is a dead Samaritan.

The Injured Man Touching a corpse makes on “unclean.” So, since the robbed man was left for dead, the priest and the Levite did, generally, what was thought the right thing.

But Jesus, clearly disagrees.

The Priest & Levite Priests and Levites were part of the tribe of Levi. They were ritual specialists and mediators between God and people. As such, these two men understandably passed by on the other side of what they may have mistaken for a dead man. They would have been ritually unclean to have touched the man.

But Jesus isn’t interested in ritual so much as praxis, not talking the law but walking the law. Stopping to help the man, for Jesus, is absolutely essential if you want to follow the law, to “love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus’ message here is clear: ministry requires getting your hands dirty, and some laws on the books undo the essential laws at the heart of the book.

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There are other characters in this story that we could explore:

The Innkeeper: I wonder how the innkeeper felt taking on a boarder who was injured? What if the Samaritan didn’t come back? What am I going to do with a man who might die on me? Should I get involved? Doesn’t the Hilton down the road have a vacancy?

The Innkeeper accepted a certain amount of risk in this story. And maybe, just maybe, he believed helping your neighbor was an essential, good thing. The story doesn’t tell us. The Innkeeper, we presume, played his role and offered hospitality who had neither a credit card or picture ID.

(We modern readers are mindful of another innkeeper of Bethlehem who turned young Mary and Joseph away because there was no room in the inn. As a result, Jesus was born in a manger and spent his first days living in a stable.)

The Robbers: Robbing someone is always wrong, but I wonder what desperation drove them. Were they poor and trapped in systems of injustice, of poverty? Were they simply thugs? Were they victims of abuse or abandonment? Were they nurtured in school? Did they have a coach willing to go the extra mile for them? Did they have a mom who listened? Did they have a faith community in which there were nurtured? My hunch is these robbers have a story worth thinking about. And while every story has a bad guy, seldom is a bad guy purely bad.

Others: And there are characters that do not appear on this page at all. All of the players had family and coworkers. They had next door neighbors. They may have had children. They had parents. The Samaritan’s mother may have been proud of her son—or worried for him, or appalled. The mother of the robbers may have been ashamed—of herself, of them.

Nobody related to the story would have been indifferent. They would have had opinions, even strong opinions. And everybody has something to lose—and something to gain.

* * *

On the way down from Jerusalem to Jericho a man is brutally beaten, robbed, and left for dead.

A preacher comes by, sees the man. He may have been moved with pity. He may have been disgusted. He may have said, "This used to be a nice neighborhood." Whatever he felt, he passed by on the other side.

A church elder comes by, sees the man. He may have been concerned. He may have thought for a moment, "How can I help him. I'm not a doctor. I'd only make things worse." He may not have had wine and oil for his wounds. He may not have even had a cell phone. What could he do? "Am I my brother's keeper?" He might have said, "This used to be a nice neighborhood." Whatever questions he asked himself, he passed by on the other side.

Then the Samaritan comes. He's the outsider, the unreliable, the untrusted, the unloved and unloveable, the unclean, the guy from the other side of the tracks, the least expected. He comes and helps the man. He tenderly nurses the man. He gives the man the time of day. He rolls up his sleeves and doesn't something.

No, it doesn't fit his schedule. No, this interruption in the middle of my busy day is not convenient. Yes, I'm going to be late. My worried wife will probably tell me I did the wrong thing because she doesn't want me arrested, or strung up, or robbed.

The Samaritan—awash in a world of excuses—did an amazing thing. He helped the man
Jesus says, "Go and do likewise."

AMEN.

Luke 10:25-37

25Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" 26He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" 27He answered, "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." 28And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." 29But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" 30Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. 31Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. 32So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. 34He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. 35The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' 36Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" 37He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

This is the Word of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.