

**A NEW LOOK AT AN OLD STORY:
“The Good Samaritan”**

Luke 10: 25-37

²⁵One day an expert in religious law stood up to test Jesus by asking him this question: "Teacher, what must I do to receive eternal life?" ²⁶Jesus replied, "What does the law of Moses say? How do you read it?" ²⁷The man answered, " 'You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind.' And, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' " ²⁸"Right!" Jesus told him. "Do this and you will live!" ²⁹The man wanted to justify his actions, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" ³⁰Jesus replied with an illustration: "A Jewish man was traveling on a trip from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he was attacked by bandits. They stripped him of his clothes and money, beat him up, and left him half dead beside the road. ³¹"By chance a Jewish priest came along; but when he saw the man lying there, he crossed to the other side of the road and passed him by. ³²A Temple assistant walked over and looked at him lying there, but he also passed by on the other side. ³³"Then a despised Samaritan came along, and when he saw the man, he felt deep pity. ³⁴Kneeling beside him, the Samaritan soothed his wounds with medicine and bandaged them. Then he put the man on his own donkey and took him to an inn, where he took care of him. ³⁵The next day he handed the innkeeper two pieces of silver and told him to take care of the man. 'If his bill runs higher than that,' he said, 'I'll pay the difference the next time I am here.' ³⁶"Now which of these three would you say was a neighbor to the man who was attacked by bandits?" Jesus asked. ³⁷The man replied, "The one who showed him mercy." Then Jesus said, "Yes, now go and do the same."

There are 32 different Parables attributed to Jesus in the New Testament. Some of them are no more than one sentence, but none of them are more famous than this one: commonly called The Good Samaritan. My purpose in choosing to study 8 of the more famous parables over the next few weeks; is to try and help us see some new truth in these old stories, that might help us live more faithful lives as his disciples.

Jesus used parables, or moral object lessons, to teach his disciples and all who might overhear his discussions; about practical truth that would help them understand who he was, and what being a disciple/follower/Christian really means. Many of the parables addressed specific subjects such as the Kingdom of God, or God's value on Money, but this one is probably the most practical of all the parables, and it's primary message is that we are to be kind and helpful to our neighbors.

All of the parables have a message; some of them use subtle forms of humor to reveal that message. Most of the parables are designed to entice people to think. Many of them are left dangling without a direct application or 'moral of the story'. Most of them are object lessons that utilized common, observable data to enlist people and engage people as they listened. Within most all of the parables Jesus invited people to find themselves in the story someplace, and I'll do the same. Often their meaning is revealed differently to each of us as we see ourselves in the story, or identify with one or other of the characters in the story. Usually, there's a hero, and a villain, though often not clearly identified upon deeper investigation. I hope you'll enjoy this new look at some old stories that Jesus told his friends. Let's try not to allow our familiarity with The Good Samaritan story to hinder us from seeing it with new eyes today.

The context of this parable is a chance encounter between Jesus, his disciples and a lawyer...(no jokes will be allowed just yet) a person knowledgeable about the Jewish law. A question is poised, "*what must I do...to inherit eternal life.*" Not a bad question, but one asked not with intent to discover knowledge, but to 'trick' or trap Jesus in his words. Jesus responds in his favorite way...with another question. The Lawyer makes an intelligent and apparently correct response to Jesus; "*love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.*" And suddenly we see the tables are turning; "*YES, (ding, ding, ding) you are correct, do this and you will live.*" And guess who is being trapped. So the lawyer asks for a clarification, (*trying to vindicate himself...*) and Jesus embarks on the story before us.

A Jewish man...is making the treacherous trip from Jerusalem (the Holy City) to Jericho, (the Deadwood of ancient Palestine). Note that Jerusalem resides at about 2300 feet above sea level, and Jericho, close to the Dead Sea, at 1300 feet below sea level.

That is a trivia question you may encounter some day: Where is the only place in the world you can fly an airplane below sea level? Over the Dead Sea! Only 20 miles separate those towns, so the road was filled with sharp curves and switchbacks, and would provide pristine hiding ground for bandits and robbers. This Jewish man, traveling alone, (not smart) falls victim to these bandits, is attacked, robbed and stripped naked, and left for dead in a ditch.

Along comes a priest, and it's important to notice that though the translation I read today doesn't include the word, most translations make note that along comes a priest who was "going down" from Jerusalem to Jericho. Now, he might simply have lived in Jericho, or he may have been going to the casino after his convention was over for the day...we don't know for sure. What we do know was that for a priest serving in the temple, touching anything unclean (which basically includes anyone not in priestly garb), and certainly includes a naked, possibly dead body would disqualify that priest from serving in the temple that day, or possibly his whole 2 week term, remembering how long the purification rituals might take. If he lived in Jericho, the temple service would have been over, or he'd have likely been staying in Jerusalem. If he was going to Jericho for the night, he could have helped. Either way, he doesn't, he in fact goes out of his way to pass by on the other side. Interesting role for a priest isn't it? If the Lawyer, or any of us spent even a moment to think who might help this poor soul, certainly it would be a man (or woman, though not in that day) of the cloth.

Along comes a Levite, a "religious" assistant at the temple. We're not exactly sure who or what this person does, let's consider him a seminary intern; Brandon, to help us personalize the story.

He at least makes an effort to examine the body, but when he can't determine if he is already dead, or maybe a faker robber who will jump on an unsuspecting "Good Samaritan" or a decoy who will entice the helper, only to be jumped by his accomplices laying in the weeds. He takes a look, and thinks better, and moves on. Are you seeing yourself yet? What do you think the Lawyer is thinking? Whom do you think he is identifying with?

Now, the hero of our story appears, and guess who it was? A Samaritan! That Jesus, what a kidder! Doesn't he know how the Jews felt about those half-breed Samaritans who had mixed their pure Jewish blood with infidel pagan blood through years of intermarriage with the hated enemies of Israel? A Samaritan! Did you know that the Jews had a law on their books that said if a Jewish person was out walking on the Sabbath and saw that a wall had fallen on a person, they could remove enough of the wall rubble to determine if the poor victim was Jewish, and if discovered that he/she was, they could then remove the wall, and help the victim. But if the victim was a Gentile, they had not only the right, but were required by the law, to leave the rest of the wall, and the victim into the 'fate of God.'" It's not written, but guess what they did if they discovered the victim was a Samaritan? Yes, they put the wall back on top of the deserving loser! I'm just speculating, taking a little 'preacherly license' with you now.

A Samaritan, goes out of his way to help a Jewish victim. Have you ever thought to see yourself in this parable as the victim? An interesting perspective, especially in light of the initial question: "*What must I do...to inherit eternal life?*" There's nothing you can do, you're dying naked in a ditch, for heaven's sake. And what of being helped by your most despised enemy.

What if you have a flat on your way to Prairie Knights, (just for the buffet) and the United Methodist Bishop's is the first car to go around you, then Father John's Episcopal Van passes by, then a carload of happy natives stops to help, or a limo pulls up and out steps...Hillary Clinton to help, or Jerry Falwell, or better yet, Hillary Clinton and Jerry Falwell get out of the limo arm in arm to help. Or what if it was Osama Bin Laden, or Saddam Hussein?

I'm sure God has a warm and gentle sense of humor. God so often sends blessings into our lives through unlikely channels. Let me warn...US! As surely as we harbor ill feelings against some ethnic, racial, or intellectual group, or some particular class of people, you can expect that someday, somehow God will allow such a person to touch your life in some strange and helpful way. The Good Samaritan so often is bad news to our preferences and prejudices! Sometimes we don't get to choose who stops to help...which ought to help us choose, whom we will stop and help.

Let me then conclude this morning with some of the more practical lessons from this most practical parable:

1. WE MUST HELP OUR NEIGHBORS; ANYONE WHO NEEDS HELP

We've a duty to help any person in need even when the trouble he is in, is his own fault. Quite often we say of someone in trouble, 'he has no one to blame but himself,' That may be true but God helped us in spite of our own foolishness, so must we. I've been in this business long enough to have been taken advantage of more times than I'd like to remember, but I still want to try and help. I know we have to be wise as serpents and harmless as doves, but we also have to be gracious. Pity, which remains merely an emotion, is not really pity.

It's easy to see this point of Jesus' story. I'm sure the lawyer saw it and was pained by it, and sometimes so are we.

Jesus wants us to realize the responsibility we have to our fellow human beings, and he wants us to understand that we are neighbors to the whole human race. It doesn't matter whether we know the other person, or whether his race or style of life is like our own; it doesn't even matter whether the person appeals to us or repulses us. Because someone is human and inhabits this planet with us, he or she is our neighbor. That's the point of the story.

2. WE MUST HELP EVEN AT RISK / COST TO OURSELVES

The Good Samaritan took a great risk to help this man, and we must too. Sending money to missionaries is admirable and necessary, but going to the mission field, even for a short time, can be risky, and sometimes costly. This man; shared his bandages, his donkey, his time, his money, his effort and energy. It cost him something, something substantial, and he did it anyway. Can you imagine me calling Bob at Comfort Inn and saying, "Yes, put Joe up for the night, and if he shows up again in the next month or so, send me that bill too?" This parable forces us a bit out of our comfort zone. You are likely to wish I'd just stop with number 2.

3. PRACTICAL SERVICE MUST TAKE PRECEDENCE IN RELIGION

I think we dare not leave this parable before we expose the elephant in the room. We cannot miss the implications Jesus directed specifically at those of us who claim to be religious. On any other day, in any other circumstance all of us would like to see ourselves as the Priest, the Levite, the religious ones! And the message cannot be oversimplified or overlooked! Practical Service must take precedence in religious matters. That's what this parable teaches. We might get a different emphasis from a different parable, but we cannot deny this point! The priest was so preoccupied with the correct carrying out of the Temple services that he failed to respond to a fellow-creature's need.

To him religion meant that the sacrifices must be absolutely properly made, that the incense must be meticulously burned, that the liturgy must be nobly correct.

A Church may have all the dignity in the world and be quite dead, because true religion issues not in ritual and ceremony but in practical help for those who need it. I better be careful or I'll start preaching...

4. HOT-HEARTED ACTION TRUMPS COLD-HEARTED ORTHODOXY

Some scholars believe this Samaritan was not an ethnic Samaritan at all, but rather that Jesus was trying to make a point even more sharply. (Hang on) People in Jesus' day who rejected the Orthodox Judaism; espoused and perverted by those silly Pharisees were often ridiculed and dismissed with the name... "Samaritan". It was the greatest insult one could level against someone hated or despised. Even Jesus Himself was so dubbed in John 8:48 *"The people retorted, "You Samaritan devil! Didn't we say all along that you were possessed by a demon?"*

So, whether we take the Samaritan as a racial Samaritan or as a heretic and loose living law breaker, so branded with that name of contempt, by those hypocritical Pharisees, and LAWYERS; the fact emerges from this parable that there may be more real Christianity, and some greater chance of getting to heaven, in someone with a hot heart and checkered past, that is willing to help; than in someone who is coldly and correctly orthodox. I don't know for sure, but I don't think any of us dare assume differently.

Let me try to retell the story, one more time. A wealthy man was walking along the road from U-Mary on his way to help serve lunch at the Ruth Meier's House, when from under the bridge by Apple Creek some hooligan punks jumped him, stole his watch and nice clothes and left him for dead in the ditch. Not long after, Sister Thomas came by in her car, but being scheduled to speak at the Legislature on an important bill, she passed by on the other side.

Next, a young theology student saw the man, but realized he was late for his internship at Trinity Lutheran Church, and so passed by on the other side. Then from somewhere along 12th Street, came a nicely dressed young female nursing student on her way to class at U-Mary, driving a brand new Cadillac, and what she saw caused her heart to fill with human compassion. She got out of her new Cadillac, and bound up his wounds as best she could. She put him on the leather back seat of her new Cadillac, turned her new Cadillac around and took the man straightway to Med Center One Emergency Room. There she asked the nurse and doctor to take good care of this man she had found badly beaten. "Take this money, it's the only money I have just now, but you keep track of what he owes; and anything his Blue Cross doesn't cover, I'll settle up with you at the end of the month...when I get my next welfare check."

(Cadillac – welfare check...) Sometimes...you just have to think differently...to act differently. *Then Jesus said, "Yes, (ding, ding, ding,) now go and do the same."*

I am heavily indebted to three authors whom I'm studying for this series, and their three books dealing with the Parables: J. Ellsworth Kalas, William Barclay, Douglas Adams. I'll give you the title later if you want them.

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