

## Making the Kingdom Our Neighborhood

Today's Gospel gives us the Parable of the Good Samaritan, a powerful story that offers as much to us as it did Jesus's followers. Before we dig into the parable, though, let's talk about the lawyer whose questions inspired it. Luke tells us that the lawyer "stood up to test Jesus," but he doesn't say why. Apparently, the lawyer has been sitting among Jesus's followers for some time, watching him and, perhaps, listening for contradictions or heresies in Jesus's teachings that could be used against him. The Sanhedrin might have sent the lawyer to observe and question Jesus just as they sent Pharisees to scrutinize John the Baptist. He might be a spy for Herod or Pilate if rumors about Jesus have found their way to royal ears. He might be there of his own accord, determined to discredit Jesus for personal reasons. Perhaps he's offended by Jesus's healing on the Sabbath or friendships with disreputable people. Perhaps his wife or child left him to follow Jesus. Or perhaps he hopes to build his own reputation by sparring with the rabbi whose wisdom and wit have made him the talk of Galilee. We don't know what motivates the lawyer. However, we do know that he's breathtakingly incompetent, because a five-year-old could answer the questions he asks in his attempt to trap Jesus.

When Jesus asks the lawyer what is written in the law, the lawyer recites two key passages. "Love God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind" comes from Deuteronomy and is embedded in the Shema, one of the most important prayers in Judaism. "Love your neighbor as yourself" is straight out of Leviticus. Every observant Jew would know both passages from infancy. Jesus might be too kind to roll his eyes when the lawyer poses such an easy question, but there may well be a few snickers from the crowd. So, when the lawyer tries to justify himself with a follow-up question, "but who is my neighbor," he might still be trying to catch Jesus in heresy, or he might just be hoping to make himself look a little less foolish.

Most Christians know the story of the Good Samaritan, who rescued and cared for a man who had been robbed, beaten, and left for dead at the side of the road. Its lesson is clear, and the story is even better if we consider three points. First, Jesus doesn't say whether the victim is a Hebrew, but his followers probably assume so. That makes him a member of their tribe, worthy of sympathy and help. Second, the priest and Levite who pass the man without stopping are both religious authorities who should show more compassion. Some Bible scholars theorize that they withhold aid because touching the man would render them unclean. Perhaps, but prioritizing ritual purity over mercy strikes me as just the sort of legalism that Jesus so thoroughly dislikes. If the Temple authorities did send the lawyer to examine Jesus, the inclusion of the priest and Levite in this parable would be a none too subtle swipe at the lawyer's masters. Third, at this point in history, the Hebrews and the Samaritans absolutely loathe one another for historic and religious reasons. You may remember that, when a Samaritan village refused to welcome Jesus, James and John, the Sons of Thunder, were ready to call down divine fire and blast the town into oblivion, something they never threatened to do to Jesus's Hebrew critics. The idea that a Samaritan might have any positive qualities, much less the benevolence and generosity that this Samaritan displays, would shock Jesus's listeners. They might struggle with the propriety of accepting help from such an inferior being. Thinking of a Samaritan as a neighbor would stretch their minds to the breaking point. And that is exactly what Jesus wants.

Last week, I promised to spend the next several Sundays talking about the coming of the Kingdom of God. Jesus doesn't explicitly reference the Kingdom in this parable; he doesn't have to, because we see the Kingdom in the Samaritan's actions. We sometimes talk about the Kingdom as if it's a magical place with golden streets and gates of pearl that flickers in and out of existence and will eventually take shape all around us like a heavenly Brigadoon. Lovely as

that image is, I don't think it's what Jesus means. My sense is that the Kingdom of God is a way of being, a grace-filled goodness that grows in the hearts and minds of faithful people as they learn to put God's wishes ahead of their own worst impulses. The Samaritan embodies the Kingdom when he puts aside whatever prejudices he might have – and he probably has some, because when people hate you, the common reaction is to hate them right back – and generously tends to the injured man as if they were long-time neighbors. Jesus's listeners might instinctively despise the Samaritan because he's not one of them and they've been taught to detest his people, but Jesus asks them to reconsider. Although the Samaritan isn't one of Adonai's chosen people by birth, his mercy marks him as a citizen of the Kingdom of God.

What does this mean for us? When people talk about Good Samaritans, there's can be a hint of condescension directed at the poor souls who are reduced to accepting charity, the naïve do-gooders who offer it, or both. Again, I don't think that's what Jesus has in mind. He tells this story not to praise handouts doled out from on high, but to encourage us to see one another differently. Jesus doesn't say who the injured man is because an unexpected tragedy could land any one of us in that ditch by the side of the road. If it's difficult to help people whom we dislike, it's even harder to accept help from them. Nonetheless, that's what neighbors in the Kingdom do.

Family circumstances have recently given me the chance to spend precious time with my brother. As a child in the 1970's, he watched a lot of *Sesame Street* (recently rescued from oblivion by the Good Samaritans at Netflix) and Warner Brothers cartoons. But my personal favorite among the programs he enjoyed featured a softspoken Presbyterian minister turned children's TV star who, at the top of every episode, changed into a cardigan knitted by his mother as he sang a catchy little song that ended with, "please, won't you be my neighbor?" Fred Rogers didn't serve a parish. He didn't preach a lot of sermons. But he devoted over thirty years

of his life to the very special ministry of assuring young children that they didn't need to do anything but be themselves to be precious and loved. Mr. Rogers gently, lovingly helped kids cope with their deepest emotional and physical concerns around issues like sibling rivalry, bullying, and parental divorce. He taught them, whenever trouble came, to look for the helpers. And he never looked or talked down to them. As far as Mr. Rogers was concerned, every last child in his audience was his beloved neighbor, right in line with today's parable. Wherever his soul has come to rest since his passing in 2003, I have no doubt that the angels continue to celebrate the Reverend Fred Rogers as a beloved ambassador of the Kingdom of God.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan teaches us that we are all neighbors, called by God to help one another whenever there's a need. Thoughts and prayers have value, but they don't go far enough. This parable confirms that Jesus meant for us to extend the kind of real, tangible help that binds up wounds and covers the costs of lodging and medical care. And when anyone asks, "who is my neighbor," the Kingdom answer must always be, "anyone who needs your help."

Luke's Gospel is a masterpiece, but it can be frustrating in one respect. Though he beautifully describes how people engage with Jesus, Luke doesn't always tell us what happens next. When the lawyer left Jesus, was he inspired to show mercy to everyone he met? Angry that his attempt to discredit Jesus failed? Fearful that those who sent him would punish him? Or embarrassed that his lawyerly cleverness had been revealed as ham-fisted malice? We'll never know this side of Heaven. But I'd like to think that, before the lawyer walked away, some kind soul in the biblical equivalent of a handmade sweater put a gentle hand on his shoulder and said, "thank you, neighbor. If you hadn't asked that second question, Jesus might never have told us that wonderful story." It's just what Mr. Rogers would have done. If we want to bring our own neighborhoods closer to the Kingdom, it's the kind of thing we should do, too. Amen.