

### Loving Your Neighbor: The Parable of the Good Samaritan

In today's Gospel, Luke treats us to one of Jesus's best known parables. It's set in the context of one of our LORD's many exchanges with religious authorities who tried to discredit him in debate. In this case, the lawyer who challenged Jesus vastly underestimated the country rabbi from Nazareth. A Jewish child could have answered the lawyer's first question – "what must I do to obtain eternal life?" – so Jesus might have rolled his eyes and sighed before asking the lawyer what the law said. The lawyer answered correctly but, recognizing that he'd made a fool of himself, quickly came back with a follow-up question: "And who is my neighbor?" That's where things start to get interesting.

When the lawyer quoted "love ... your neighbor as yourself," he was citing the Book of Leviticus, which appears in Hebrew Scripture and, of course, in the Christian Old Testament. The word that Leviticus uses for "neighbor" is רֵעִי, and it translates a little differently than we moderns might expect. When we hear the word "neighbor," we think of the folks who live next door or across the street. There's always an element of physical proximity. But that element is absent from the Hebrew. In the context of Leviticus, רֵעִי means something more like "the children of my people," and the full verse reads, "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD." If Jesus had asked the lawyer who his neighbor was, the lawyer would have replied that his neighbors were his fellow Hebrews, the children of Abraham. If he wanted to be especially clever he might have alluded to his family tribe, but he probably wouldn't have mentioned the town where he lived and he definitely wouldn't have suggested that his neighbors were anyone other than his fellow observant Jews. Any priest, Philistine or Levite who happened to overhear the conversation

would have agreed, because the letter and emphasis of traditional Hebraic law focused on the Jewish community.

Now, lest anyone think I'm criticizing Hebrew law or the Jewish people, let me be absolutely clear that I am not. The Jews have been discriminated against since they were enslaved in Egypt. Being God's chosen people has never protected them from persecution and violence; if anything, their special status has provoked the haters. Jewish culture prizes faith, family, education, tradition, and hard work, and it's the foundation from which Christianity is fortunate to spring. I have nothing but love and respect for Judaism. In Jesus's time, their faith required the Jews to live in strict observance of the 613 commandments of the Torah, a life of devotion that was most readily accomplished in an observant community. It makes perfect sense that Hebrew law was written for that community – no one else had to comply with the law or risk the wrath of God.

Jesus's listeners would have presumed that that man who was beaten, robbed and left for dead on the road was a Hebrew. So when Jesus chose a Samaritan to be the hero of his parable, it must have come as a shock. The Samaritans of Jesus's time lived in the northern half of Israel. They practiced a different kind of Judaism than the Jews in the south, there had been major religious disputes between the two groups and, worst of all from the traditionalists' perspective, the Samaritans had intermarried with pagans. If you were to read the next verse of Leviticus, you'd see that Hebrew law forbade cross-breeding livestock, sowing fields with two kinds of seed, or even blending linen and wool in the same garment. Intermarrying with pagans would have been considered a horrifying sin. The folks listening to Jesus would have seen the Samaritans as the lowest of the low, the sort of people that a pious person would cross the road to avoid. Being helped, or even touched, by a Samaritan? Unthinkable.

But let's not be too quick to condemn Jesus's audience. In our own time, plenty of people sneer down their noses at anyone they see as different or less than themselves. People of color, the LGBTQIA+ community, those who are differently abled, Jews, Muslims, the sick, the elderly, women ... far too many members of our society have been victims of discrimination and scorn. And, as we discussed just last week, our lawmakers seem determined to roll back decades of hard-won progress, making things even worse for those who are already disadvantaged.

So, what was Jesus doing when he told the story of the Good Samaritan? Most obviously, he was challenging the religious traditions that prioritized legalism over God's grace. Remember, Jesus himself was a Jewish rabbi. He wasn't trying to start a new religion – he was trying to reform the faith to which he and his followers already belonged. St. Luke, in telling his “orderly account” of Jesus's ministry and Passion, was trying to normalize Christianity as an inclusive faith that welcomed Jews and Gentiles alike. The fact that this parable appears only in Luke's Gospel doesn't mean that Jesus didn't tell it, though. This story is so consistent with Jesus's message throughout the Gospels that I believe it simply has to be his.

The parable of the Good Samaritan told Jesus's followers that, in matters of faith, mercy takes precedence over strict obedience to the law. Jesus's listeners would have known that the purity laws required the priest and Levite to bypass the injured traveler, so this parable illustrated the shortcomings of merciless legalism. The lawyer, at least, should have found that instructive.

But I believe that Jesus was doing more than just challenging rigid interpretation of the law when he chose to tell this story. If that had been his only goal, he could have made the merciful helper a fellow Jew who took pity on an injured member of his own community. Instead, Jesus chose a despised outsider, a Samaritan, someone who would never have been seen by his followers as worthy or even able to offer mercy. Yet, according to Jesus, the Samaritan

provided first aid, transportation and shelter to an injured stranger, spending two days' wages and promising more as needed to ensure that the victim would get proper care. The bigoted lawyer can't even get the word "Samaritan" past his lips, referring to the rescuer only as "the one who showed mercy." Yet, Jesus tells the lawyer to "go and do the same" as the Samaritan if he's serious about wanting eternal life. It must have been demoralizing at first for the lawyer to learn that all of his expertise and cleverness were worth less in God's eyes than the Samaritan's simple kindness, but I hope the lesson did him good eventually. It's one we all can stand to learn.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan discredits bigotry, humanizing and dignifying an outcast. It tells us to put aside our own prejudices and recognize that we are all equal in God's eyes, whatever society says to the contrary. This parable demonstrates that no one is too humble to help us; it also calls us to respect our shared humanity and accept help when we need it without disparaging its source.

Today, I believe this parable serves another essential purpose. Last week, we spoke about young people who avoid our churches because they think Christianity is inextricably tied to social conservatism and, in particular, to prejudice against the LGBTQIA+ community. This parable proves that Jesus himself wasn't a bigot and he didn't want his followers to be bigoted, either. Christ calls us to love God with all our hearts, minds, and souls and to love our neighbors as ourselves. *All* of our neighbors. No exceptions. The Samaritan is good, not just because he is merciful but because he is a beloved child of God, just like all the people who are discriminated against today. So when someone tells you that Christianity is all about strict social conservatism and exclusion, tell them the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Our LORD has given Christians a beautiful, inclusive story to share. My prayer is that we will be enthusiastic in telling it, and even more diligent in living it. Let them see that we're Christian by our love. *Amen.*