

The Good Samaritan: A Metaphor for Mercy

Luke 10: 25-37

15th Sunday in Ordinary Time/ 15th July 2007

If you go online to the Google web search page, type in the words “Good Samaritan,” more than two million entries will soon appear in seconds. You’ll find references to sermons, articles, commentaries on the text, and Bible studies. You’ll find links to many churches named for this biblical character, links to countless Good Samaritan hospitals worldwide, civic organizations and philanthropic agencies providing support to those in need, shelters, family aid societies, you name it. There are Good Samaritan Laws and Good Samaritan Acts. There are even Good Samaritans awards given out to individuals who display heroic civic responsibility and care, especially to strangers.

The idea of a Good Samaritan has taken on a life of its own, a *metaphor* that’s come to have almost universal recognition and meaning, usually without a religious association. Local newspapers love to run Good Samaritan stories of heroic rescue and protection. Call someone a Good Samaritan and everyone will know what you’re trying to say about that person, someone good, noble, respectable, a person of high virtue, displaying selfless character. It’s a metaphor Jesus creates in the parable found only in here Luke’s gospel. However, it’s a metaphor that’s been kind of detached from the parable altogether and taken on a life of its own.¹ On its own, the metaphor basically means something like one who promotes public civility and a generic spirit of helpfulness. For many, that’s all Jesus is trying to offer here: a nice life-principle by which to live one’s life. But this reading would completely miss the point. This is a classic case of where our assumptions about what text means, or what we have always thought it meant since church school, actually gets in the way of allowing the text to speak in all of its wisdom, grace, and power. *What I would like to do this morning is try to reattach the metaphor back into the parable.*

I played around with several titles for this morning, trying to capture the heart of this exchange with the lawyer. “When Religion Hinders Grace” or “Dangerous Religion” or “When Religion Obstructs.” “When Religion Thwarts

¹ I am indebted to the commentary on this text provided by the Center for Excellence in Preaching at Calvin Theological Seminary, particularly the rich insight of approaching the Parable of the Good Samaritan as metaphor: <http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/thisWeek/viewContent.php?iID=103&sID=1> (accessed 10th July 2007).

Mercy.” “When Religion gets in the Way,” or “When Religion Puts Life at Risk.” Not bad, but they’re all inadequate, including the one I chose, to get at what I think is going on here in this powerful text. If you think you can get a little life-lesson out of this parable, a principle to live your life to somehow make you feel more religious or holy or special, then you might go way disappointed (or angry with me).

Cultural anthropologist, Mary Catherine Bateson, notes, “Any metaphor is double-sided, offering both new insight and new confusion.” Jesus the master teacher does this; he uses the metaphor of the Good Samaritan to both *judge* (yielding confusion, as we will see) and to *restore* the lawyer (yielding new insight). By *judge*, I mean judge or, *expose* for the lawyer how his religiosity was hindering him from experiencing the eternal life he was obviously so anxious to achieve. Through grace, Jesus is giving him the chance to see his life from an entirely different perspective. By *restore*, I mean Jesus provides for him a new insight, a radically way of living, a different, a life-transforming, yet costly way, only if he’s willing to see it. The American physicist, Robert Stetson Shaw, an early pioneer of chaos theory, made the incisive point “You don’t see something until you have the right metaphor to let you perceive it.” What’s true in science is true in all areas of knowledge, including knowledge of God. *We can’t see reality without the suitable metaphor, the adequate lens or filter, the window that allows us to see reality. Without the appropriate metaphor, we remain blind to the truth. The metaphor brings us deeper into reality.*

The parable of the Good Samaritan was Jesus’ way of making a theological point, of opening a window for us, saying something about God and a life shaped by this God, which we probably wouldn’t be able to see without the metaphor.

So what’s going on here? Jesus is publicly teaching and inevitably offends and troubles the religious authorities. A lawyer stands up to test Jesus. Now, by lawyer, we don’t mean Johnnie Cochrane or a federal prosecutor like Patrick Fitzgerald, not a servant of civil law, but probably a rabbi who specialized in interpreting the Law, that is the Torah of the Jewish people. It was the lawyer’s task to make sure that every “Thou shalt” in scripture was followed and obeyed, down to every, possible detail. Not just the Ten Commandments, but all the laws, all 603 (!) laws, especially the purity codes which one finds in Leviticus. I don’t know anyone today who in times of trial goes to Leviticus for inspiration, but all those purity codes were important for many Jews in the First Century, codes which people were expected obsessively to follow, as dictated by the religious authorities in the Temple. Everyone had to conform to the Jewish Law,

following the Law was what it meant to be Jewish, it was what it meant to be a follower of Yahweh, it was what it meant to be religious, holy, spiritually pure.

The lawyer was an expert in scripture and tried to test Jesus. “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Good question, a tough one, but *not* abstract. It’s what everyone was thinking and worrying about. Jesus, being the consummate teacher, throws the question back upon the lawyer, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” Is Jesus’ buttering him up, flattering him a little? “You’re such a good lawyer; surely you must know the answer.” The lawyer says, “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.” Good answer. Jesus, himself, said this was the summary of the Law. Jesus is impressed. “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

Then the text says, “But wanting to *justify* himself, he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’” And with this question we get to the heart of this exchange, the lawyer shows his true colors, he exposes his heart. This is the key to understanding the parable!

The lawyer doesn’t want to know who his neighbor is because he is so eager to help him. At the popular, secular level this story is told to inspire people to lend a helping hand to one’s neighbor. But the irony here is that the man who asked the question about the neighbor was not really looking for a way to help, but *looking for a way out from helping, he was looking for a loophole*. Because he wanted to justify himself – in other words he wanted to know what the basic minimum requirement of the Law might be so that he would only have to do the bare minimum – nothing more and nothing less. Define neighbor for me, he says to Jesus, and then I can know who I have to help and who I don’t have to help. He’s looking for a way to help only certain people and still have a clean conscience before God. He wanted to know the minimum requirement of the law, just to get by, nothing more and less if he could. There’s nothing noble or heroic or loving in his question. The lawyer was using the Law to protect himself and potentially others from feeling they have any obligation to help anyone beyond the legal definition of what constitutes a neighbor.

Frederick Buechner imaginatively says this is what the lawyer really wanted from Jesus, a legal definition of a neighbor. “A neighbor (hereinafter referred to as the party of the first part) is to be construed as a person of Jewish descent whose residence is within a radius of three statute miles of one’s own

residence (hereinafter referred to as the party of the second part) unless another person of Jewish descent lives between the party of the first part and the party of the second part, in which case the intervening person shall be considered neighbor to the party of the first part, hence relieving the party of the second part of any responsibility whatsoever.”

That’s not the kind of definition the lawyer received. Enter the Good Samaritan. “A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho...” “A certain man,” the Greek here literally means, “Some guy,” “Somebody,” or “Anybody.” Nobody specific gets mugged and robbed and stripped and beaten, left him half dead. [As an aside, I’ve always had a personal connection with this story. When I was in junior high, I attended a presbytery-wide youth retreat where we had to act this parable out. I was the guy who was mugged and left in a ditch.] A priest walks by, sees him, but then intentionally walks to the other side. Then a Levite, sees him, and then does the same thing, moves away. Now both of these individuals are learned, sophisticated, wealthy men of influence, expected to model civic responsibility and model religious virtues. Then Jesus really throws in a curveball in this story, a *Samaritan* goes by – now for any respectable, law-abiding Jew, Samaritans were unclean people of questionable morals and virtues. The average Jew considered them with contempt and suspicion as a false follower of Yahweh. When the Samaritan sees him, he does not move away, but is moved with pity. Notice the way Luke tells it, “He went *to him* and *bandaged* his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal [his own animal and not another!], brought him to an inn and took care of him.” You know the story. He advanced the inn keeper some money, told him to look after him, keep a tab and I’ll pay it on the return journey. He was not afraid to touch him, to go near him, to get close.

So Jesus asks, which of the three, do you think was the neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers? Now before we answer, *it’s really important not to see this parable as a simple moralizing tale, as if to say being a neighbor is the one who was nice and that the priest and Levite were simply bad men, so don’t be like them, which is how this story might be taught, falsely (!), to a six year-old.* There’s more going on here.

The two are both *clergy*. They know the purity laws. They were both probably on their way to the Temple in Jerusalem, which means they had to be ritually clean according to the Law. If they went over to that man to see if he was alive, turned him over, maybe saw his bloody face or arms and accidentally touched his blood as they turned him over, they would then be ritually unclean

for seven days and would not be able to perform any of their religious duties until after that time. And if they touched the man and he was *dead*, they would definitely be ritually impure. So for the sake of religious, ritual purity, for the sake of going to the Temple to worship Yahweh, they look the other way, they don't get involved, do nothing, maybe would have left the man die. In the next chapter of Luke, after taking the Pharisees to task for their empty piety, he says, "Woe also to you *lawyers!* For you load people with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not lift a finger to ease them. *Woe to you!* (Luke 11:46-47a)."

Can you see how dangerous legalistic religion can be? Can you see how toxic, violent, and destructive this kind of religious expression can be? Not just within First Century Judaism, but in expressions of Judaism and Christianity for centuries and its rampant in some contemporary expressions of Christianity today. It's a legalism obsessed with following the Law instead of the gospel. Religious legalism in any form is vicious and lethal and has no capacity for mercy. Sometimes it's even deadly. Within legalistic religion, the Law becomes more important than the needs of the *people*. As one commentator has put it, "If you are hung up on the law, then odds are good you will always find excuses not to love your neighbor." If you live by the law, then you'll get the law. Your excuses might even sound pretty holy, maybe back them up with a scripture verse or two justifying your position, maybe throw in a quote from *The Book of Order* and a Confession or Creed, but you can still be very far from the kingdom of God. If we start with law, we'll never arrive at grace. Grace is living beyond the law. Grace is about mercy. *Jesus' piercing parable demonstrates the Samaritan knows more about grace than the clergy do.*

Grace is required to see beyond limits, beyond minimums. And grace, not law, is required in order for us to see every woman and man and child in the ditch of life as our neighbor, otherwise we can come up with all kind of excuses, maybe even some really holy-sounding reasons why we should not help. That's not the way of Jesus. In fact, Jesus takes on that entire way of thinking and believing. After visiting Israel recently and immersing myself in Jesus' world, I'm beginning to believe that, perhaps, this more than anything else is what ultimately gets him in trouble with the religious leaders and eventually gets him killed. Jesus puts people first, above the law, because they bear the image of God.

In his classic work on the nature of Christian love, Kierkegaard (1813-1855) once asked the same question as the lawyer, "Who is my neighbor?" Not wishing to justify himself, his answer was informed by grace. His answer, living

from the truth of this parable, was “every man.”² Everyone is your neighbor. The word “neighbor” literally means “the close one.” She is the one beside you. He is the one beside you. Every one we meet, whether in this church, or at work, at the pool, the immigrant (maybe especially so) who cuts your lawn or paints your house, the person beside you in traffic or on the plane. Then we reach out or perceive or relate to that person near us, beside us, close to us and seek their welfare and have an obligation to that person, *not* because we have to, *not* because some law requires it, *not* because we’re earning points to get us into heaven. No one is saved that way and thinking that way is only more of a bind. There’s no freedom in that way of being. We reach out because that same person bears the image of God for us.

There are no minimums, no limits and no loopholes to this kind of mercy. Grace even loves to find loopholes for the sake of mercy. Through this metaphor of mercy we begin to perceive everything and *everyone* differently and discover neighbors everywhere – hungry for mercy. That’s the point. That’s the start of eternal life.

Rev. Dr. Kenneth E. Kovacs

*Catonsville Presbyterian Church
Catonsville, Maryland*

² Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love: Some Christian Reflections in the Form of Discourses*. Trans. Howard and Edna Hong; preface by R. Gregor Smith (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1964[1847]), 72.