

## Who is Your Neighbor?

Luke 10: 25-37

*Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time/ August 16, 2009*

The story of the Good Samaritan is probably Jesus' best-known parable. It's often seen as a simple lesson in the virtue of reaching out to one's neighbor. And yet its familiarity might be why this story often fails to have the impact it must originally have had. It was theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) who reminded us that whenever we read scripture we need to approach it as if we're hearing it for the very first time. We shouldn't read scripture assuming there's only one lesson or meaning to get out of the text, and then assume we understand it. Scripture doesn't work this way. We return to scripture again and again to mine its treasures in order to hear what God might be saying *today to us anew* through the text. Otherwise scripture runs the risk of becoming a dead text. If we think we know its meaning, then there's no motive to *listen* for the Word of God.

*This* is not a dead text. Our familiarity with this story might lead us to assume that we know what Jesus is talking about. The idea of a "Good Samaritan" has certainly made its way into the secular vernacular. We read this text, hear this parable and think that Jesus is offering a lesson about the kind of lives we're supposed to live, about how we're expected to treat one another, especially the stranger, that person in need we come across. We might think it's a nice story designed to make us nice people. But, this is more than a story. It's a parable.

Parables are not simply morality tales, providing guidelines for behavior. That's not what parables are designed to do. Then what are they supposed to do? Parables are related to the Hebrew tradition of teaching through proverbs, riddles, and wise sayings. But as a *form*, they are utterly unique to the New Testament. Jesus is the first teacher to employ them and do so in remarkable ways. Parables are not simply illustrations or examples to help us understand complex theological ideas. They are short narrative fictions that always refer to some *external symbol*, they point to something else, designed to help us grasp something else. And that external symbol is the *Kingdom or Realm of God*. This is the filter through which we must hear Jesus' words.

The parables are always intentionally *shocking*. They are designed to wake us up and turn us inside out. We return to them again and again in order for us to fathom the mysteries of God, so that the truths they contain might enfold us, encourage us, and penetrate our lives. Parables pack a powerful punch right to the gut of our complacency and dullness regarding the Kingdom of God. That's what this parable does. And it packs a powerful punch – especially to the lawyer, the rabbinic scholar who tried to test Jesus by asking, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?"

First, this rabbinic scholar, this student of the Jewish Law, is asking this question not because he wants to know how to get into heaven. Indeed, that's how you might have heard this text, that Jesus telling us if you want to get to heaven, then this is how you must behave. It's not that simple. The lawyer is worried about the state of his soul. He wants to be assured that he is inheriting the fullness of life that comes with God's covenant with the Hebrew people. For the

lawyer, the way to the life of God is by following the Law (Torah) in every excruciating detail. He is obsessed with “getting it right,” obsessed with perfection, a cold, ethical exactitude, and is afraid of getting it wrong. We know that around this time there was a saying about the study of Torah that “the study of the Law is of higher rank than practicing it.” This guy knows the Law and his responses to Jesus are correct. But you can be technically observant, know all the answers, but be very far from the intent of the law.

Jesus throws the question back at him, “You’re the expert, why are you asking me?” And, again, the lawyer’s response is scripturally correct. He pulls from Deuteronomy, he quotes the correct scripture. God has a claim over every aspect of our lives – heart, soul, strength, and mind. We are called to love God with the depth of who we are, with our innermost being, to love God with energy, strength, inner resolve and intellect. We are to withhold nothing back from God. The lawyer knows the answer. It’s in his head. He knows the Law. He knows the facts – but he is lost and far from the Kingdom of God, as far as Jesus is concerned. It’s not enough to simply *know* these things – we have to *do* them. Really do them.

But who is my neighbor? Ah, that’s the tricky part. Society during Jesus’ time was made up of strictly ordered boundaries – and you did not cross them. Society was hierarchical and patriarchal. There were Jews and then Gentiles – and Samaritans were in a class all by themselves. These were foreigners who were not expected to show sympathy to anyone. It was your religious duty as a Jew to maintain these boundaries all the time, because boundaries allowed groups to assert power over the other. Your “neighbor,” generally viewed, didn’t mean everyone, because there are limits. Your respect and care only extended to your particular group, you didn’t reach out to “those” people. Because many Jews at this time were anxious about whether they were keeping every aspect of the Law *and* because they were trying to maintain the strict boundaries of their society, they were also asking: *What is the absolute limit required for me, what is the minimum I can get away with in order to fulfill the Law and no more?* There was a reluctance to do anything more than the minimum.

The road from Jerusalem down to Jericho descends 3,300 feet over seventeen miles. It was a very dangerous place, full of bandits. This man, unidentified, is beaten, stripped, and left for dead. He has no identity, except need. The priest was expected to help – but he passed on the other side of the road. The Levite was the lay associate of the priest. Maybe he passed on the other side and maybe looked away because if this man was dead, the priest and Levite were obligated to bury him. And burying him would have made them ritually unclean for a time. It’s easier to just keep going.

Then Jesus knocks the lawyer in the gut. The next person who comes along is a Samaritan – and it is the Samaritan who does what the Law requires, indeed he does more than the minimum. He exceeds the Law and ignores the societal boundaries. Now it might be tough for us to see just how shocking it would have been for this lawyer to hear this story, but we must try. Jesus was being intentionally offensive in order to wake up this rabbinic scholar.

From a Jewish perspective, Samaritans were not good people. Only a non-Jew could see a Samaritan as good. They were pseudo-Jews, subhuman. They were a ritually unclean people, descendants of mixed marriages with people of Assyria (2 Kings 17: 6, 24). This account would

have been earth-shattering, mind-blowing for the lawyer. It would have meant the collapse of his moral world order, the collapse of reality. It would have been offensive, shocking. He probably went away with a massive headache, dizzy, stunned, and in a daze. By depicting the hero as a *Samaritan*, Jesus was demolishing all the exclusionary boundary expectations of his time and dehumanized people – and calls us to do the same. Social position, categories – race, religion, region, gender – count for little. In a world where there were strict lines of insiders and outsiders, the Jesus movement sought to dissolve all these boundaries. It's really quite extraordinary. So that after these categories are stripped away, what's left is the individual, a person like you and me in need. The neighbor, then, becomes, as Kierkegaard (1813-1855) taught us, is the one who is standing before or beside you, no matter whom he or she might be. The neighbor is everyone. Breaking down the barriers that divide, you reach across them and you show mercy so that the one seen is thereby acknowledged as worthy of love and respect.

*Why?* Not because if you live this way – behave this way, being simply nice and civil – you get to go to heaven. Not because this is what God expects from us and therefore we have to do it, as if it were our duty. This is about more than merely ethical duty. If you hear this parable as only a command, as a law to be followed then you're not hearing it. It's more than a command. *It would be cruel for Jesus to set this up as an ethical ideal knowing full well that no one can fulfill it and then judge us for failing. The gospel is good news precisely because it does not offer us an ethical legalism, does not offer us one more list of do's and don't's, does not offer us yet one more empty strategy to improve our lives in quick, easy steps that we can master in a few weeks.*

This parable packs a punch because it allows us to fathom the divine mystery and tells us something about God, the God who reaches out across the great divide that separates us from God and shows mercy. Ultimately, this parable is not a moral lesson for us, as much as it is for us a profound theological disclosure into the very depths of God's being, of God's nature. Jesus says, *This is God.* Through this parable Jesus seems to be saying, *You're far from God because your imaginations need to be re-ignited. You have to be open to the unimaginable.* If you want to take part in the life of God, then you must rethink how you envision God. If you want to take part in eternity, then you have give up the ways you have thought about God. If you want to realize the promises of being a child of God (which is eternal life), then give up childish ways of looking at God, then think of God in *this* way.

*God* is like that Samaritan who reaches out for the victim and cares for the one left for dead along the side of the road. For Jesus to use this image, this metaphor would have been extremely offensive, scandalous – which is the point. God is like a Samaritan who will not walk on the other side of the road to avoid us. This is who *God* is – Yahweh, like the Samaritan, is not limited by destructive boundaries, nor does Yahweh act with a calculating heart, but is rich in mercy and free to show mercy. That's who God is. God is rich in mercy.

When we know that God is merciful – that's when we know *how* to be merciful. It cannot be taught, it has to be experienced, received. Loving our neighbor must not be divorced from the wider mercy of God. Our love for our neighbor is an expression of the love God has for us *already*. Those who show mercy (and *receive* mercy) are living in the Kingdom. We don't

worry about rewards. *We don't get the Kingdom if we're merciful. We get to live in the Kingdom, when we know God is merciful.*

When mercy is shown, we discover that the Kingdom is nowhere other than here. It's the quality of life we receive when we know God's mercy and with hearts that are generous and good, we reach out toward each other. We see our neighbor. We at times stop along the highways of our lives and notice people – really see people, hold them with high regard, not as an *it*, but as a *thou*, as Kierkegaard said, and struggle for what's best for them and reach out to them, our neighbors.<sup>1</sup> We see our neighbors as *thou* – the drivers that drive us nuts on the beltway, the person at work who drives you crazy, the person behind the check-out register at Safeway, fellow travelers (I had to remind myself of this while traveling over the last two weeks, encountering all kinds of people in many different airports. I was losing my patience.), the people we meet along the way who are usually invisible to you. They are all *thou-s*. And we treat them as such, not because we *have* to; but because we *want* to. This makes all the difference in the world. This is the difference, of whether we are near or far from the Kingdom.

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<sup>1</sup> From the quotation in the worship bulletin: “It is characteristic of childhood to say: *Me want – me – me*. It is characteristic of youth to say, *I – and I – I*.’ The mark of maturity and the dedication of the eternal is to will to understand that this I has no significance if it does not become the *you*, the *thou*, to whom the eternal incessantly speaks and says: *‘You shall, you shall, you shall.’* Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love* (1847).