

The Good Samaritan

A sermon offered by Ruth Hopkins
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Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ
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Luke 10: 25-37

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "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." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend." Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

We know today's reading so well; in fact, just reading it again makes my eyes want to glaze over. We know the players, we know the plot, we know the outcome. The Good Samaritan is the model for Christian behavior. Hospitals are named after this do-gooder. The main message? Love your neighbor, and everyone is your neighbor.

Many preachers try to give this old, old story a new spin by delving deep into the little known facts about this story. The road to Jericho is dangerous and was called the Road of Blood. Samaritans were regarded as half human, they did not follow the Jewish food laws, and they even defiled the temple with human bones during Passover in Jesus' time. These are interesting facts, but they don't change the story, or make it less familiar. And they certainly don't make the story any easier to take.

For let's face it, loving your neighbor is not always the easiest thing to do. Especially when Jesus tells us that everyone is our neighbor. I read the story, I get the message, but I still feel a bit glazed over and tired.

Take my own neighbors, please. Lovely people. They have just erected a huge play set in their backyard that spoils the view of my favorite white birch tree. It is their property, their yard; they have every right to erect this ugly monstrosity. I have nothing against play sets or children, mind you. But sometimes, loving your neighbor means giving up the view and keeping your mouth shut.

I would like to think I would stop on a dangerous road in the night and help a complete stranger, but I don't know for sure if I would. I might pull out my cell phone and call for help. Does that count?

We all know people who really come through with the neighbor thing. They remember birthdays, write thoughtful notes to the homebound, and offer to take a hot dish to someone sick or alone. I want so much to be more like those people, but I find it very difficult. I have trouble just getting my own stuff in order. I think of nice things to do, but can't seem to execute them. Does thinking about it count?

Then there are the people, the street person, the homeless who we feel we really must help, but sometimes wonder about. We wonder if they are really in need.

When I worked at another church as an administrator we had a food pantry. There were no rules, no requirements. People could come as often as they had need. Several did come quite regularly. They seemed to be in need a lot. The regulars, we called them. "Oh, here comes so and so, the secretary would say to me, "back for more."

It is hard when you notice that the people you help have a new manicure, or a new car. When the person you just gave money to seems to have enough for a case of Camels. It is hard not to judge. Do they really need the money for rent? And what about the thousand of people round the world in need; real need, and you can't do a thing

about it, except maybe write a check. Does a check count, is it enough? You start to feel a bit glazed and tired. And guilty.

We have a food pantry here at Cross Creek, modeled after the one in Sara Miles' book Take This Bread. In it she confesses to intensely disliking some of the regulars at the pantry she started in California. It seems certain people always took more than their fair share, complained about what they did take, and it made her mad. She wanted to help the truly needy, not enable the takers.

It is tempting to water down Jesus' message in this parable and say that he does not really mean what he says. I think he means it all right. But maybe we really don't understand what he's saying.

Tom Thatcher is the author of Jesus the Riddler: The Power of Ambiguity in the Gospels, Thatcher says every one of Jesus' parables is a riddle, meant to be either unanswerable, or so reframing and mind bending that you dare not answer it, because your whole world will change. He also says that the Kingdom of God was not just one topic of Jesus' teaching, but THE topic of Jesus' teaching. He writes:

“Let me be absolutely clear on this point: I think that the Kingdom was more than just a central issue or a core value for Jesus; rather, I think that everything Jesus said and did was a revelation of some aspect of this reality.”

The parable of the Good Samaritan is then, about who our neighbors will be in the Kingdom of God. The answer, for the lawyer, is so mind bending, so world changing that he finds it hard to name.

At the end, when Jesus, the Riddler, poses the question, “Who was the neighbor to the beaten man in the road?” the lawyer's answer is NOT “The Samaritan.”. No, the idea of a Samaritan, a man who does not keep the food laws, half human, the idea that such a man would be a neighbor – well, he just can't say it, can he? Instead, when asked who was the neighbor, the lawyer answers, “The one who showed him mercy.”

Jesus lets the lawyer's answer be, he doesn't get all Chuck Norris on him and force him to say "the Samaritan." No, it is enough. The reframing, the shock will continue, the glazed look in the lawyer's eyes will clear, and his world will never be the same.

And showing mercy, as best we can, is enough for us. For Sara Miles did not shut her food pantry down because a few took too much. She had to set boundaries for the good of many, but she still loved. We are human. Sometimes we can only take small steps.

Like our lawyer, the small steps count. He could not say "Samaritan" but he was on his way. So are we. We keep trying, keep giving, keep loving. We keep on working at the neighbor thing, sometimes with gritted teeth, often with judgment. Does it count, is it enough?

It counts. It is enough.

One of my friends from college is now an opera singer in Germany. He told the story of when he sang at a remembrance service for *Kristalnacht*, the "night of broken glass", when Jewish storefronts were destroyed and Jewish synagogues vandalized during the Nazi regime. After the concert, a man and his son came over to him. The man pointed to my friend, and said to the small boy, "Look son, this is a Jew." My friend said he rather at first felt like a zoo exhibit, but now he feels differently. "I don't mind", he said later, "they were not Jewish, but they came to the remembrance service. It was enough."

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus is calling us to notice the humanity of the stranger on a strange road. Jesus is describing God's neighborhood, where everyone is a neighbor, and no one is half human. Every step we make towards it counts.