

Who Is My Neighbor?
A Sermon on Luke 10:25-37
Proper 10
July 14, 2019

Introduction

It is hard to find a more familiar story in the gospels. [Does the picture on the screen need a caption?] The word Samaritan has passed into the English language as defining a person who is generous in helping somebody in need. We have Good Samaritan laws that shield the do-gooders from civil liability if something goes wrong. We have hospitals across the country with Samaritan as part of their name. The Disciples of Christ have an organization called Southwest Good Samaritan Ministries that organizes mission trips in the Lower Rio Grande Valley to help people in need on the border. Joel has been on several of those mission trips.

Israelites had a different understanding of Samaritans in the first century. We need to try to hear this parable from their perspective to recover what Jesus originally intended. There is more wisdom in this parable than the popular understanding.

First Move: The Parable to First Century Ears

First, we have to separate the parable from the frame around the parable. The parable is the story about three people coming across a victim of a robbery on the road. The Jesus Seminar has coded this parable red. That means that a majority of scholars believe that these words were probably spoken by the historical Jesus. The frame is the conversation between Jesus and the lawyer that surrounds the story. This is the creation of the author of the Gospel of Luke. The word neighbor does not appear in the parable, but the frame interprets the parable as telling us what it means to be a good neighbor.

Let's try to hear the story without the frame.

A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho.

What do we know about this man? The text identifies him as some man or a certain man. The storyteller is trying to tell us that this could be anybody. The story is told from point of view of this man, so the audience would be like to identify with him. Jesus is speaking to Israelites, so they would assume it was someone like them, an Israelite.

What do we know about the road from Jerusalem to Jericho? The road was 18 miles long. It drops 3200 feet. Jerusalem was at an elevation of 2,500 feet. Jericho was at 770 feet below sea level. The road was notorious for robberies. There were lots of places for robbers to hide and attack travelers. So we know the road is dangerous.

The man fell among robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and left him lying half-dead.

We don't get any details about who the robbers were or their motives. All we know is what they did to the man.

And by chance a certain priest was going down by that road.

This is a good sign. By chance a priest comes along. The audience has hope that he will help the man.

The priest is identified as a certain priest or some priest. So it could be any priest. It is not the high priest but an ordinary priest. Priests were descended from Aaron. They helped perform rituals at the temple in Jerusalem.

When he saw him, he passed by on the other side.

What does the priest see when he sees the man? He has been stripped of his clothes, which were markers of social class and ethnicity. The priest would not know who the man was. The priest could see that the man has been beaten and likely would assume that the man was beaten by robbers. The priest may not know whether the man is dead or alive.

Why does the priest pass by on the other side? The text doesn't say. The audience is troubled.

Likewise a Levite . . . came and when he saw [him], he passed by on the other side.

Levites were descendants of the tribe of Levi. They were entrusted with minor services in the Temple. The Levite has the same response when he comes upon the man. We don't know why he passed the man by.

Now the audience is expecting this to be a folk tale about three men. Folk tales tend to come in threes, like the Three Little Pigs and the Three Bears. The audience is disappointed that the first two men failed to show compassion, now the expectation is that the third man will be the hero. The audience expects the hero to be someone like them, a lay Israelite. The expectation is that the triad will be a priest, a Levite and an Israelite.

And a certain Samaritan who was traveling came upon him.

Parables always surprise us, and this one is no exception. A certain Samaritan is the third man. Samaritans and Jews had been enemies for centuries. Amy-Jill Levine, a New Testament scholar who is also an orthodox Jew, says that for a modern

Israeli audience to feel the same shock, the triad would be a priest, a Levite and Osama bin Laden. The idea of a good Samaritan would have been an oxymoron to a Jewish audience. It would be like saying a good rapist or a good murderer. We don't hear about good Christians or good Catholics. We call the Samaritan good because the original audience would have struggled to believe he was good.

Samaria was the land formerly known as the Northern Kingdom of Israel. When the Northern Kingdom was conquered by the Assyrians in 722 CE, many of their people were carried into exile and the land was repopulated with people from other countries who had been conquered by Assyria. Israelites saw them as half breeds. They rejected Jerusalem as the center of Israelite worship and set up a temple in Mount Gerizim. They continued to rely on the Pentateuch as holy scripture, but they rejected the prophetic books and the wisdom books. The Samaritans had enough of a common history and common religious beliefs that the Israelites could despise them for their differences.

The Samaritan would be a foreigner on this road. It would be especially dangerous for him. He would have been a likely target for Israelite bandits.

And when he saw [him], he was stirred with pity.

The despised Samaritan is the one who is moved with compassion. The Samaritan cannot identify the half-dead man. He only knows that it is someone who needs help.

4 The parable gives lots of details about the extraordinary lengths the Samaritan went to to help the man.

He binds up his wounds. Unless he was carrying a first aid kit, he would have had to tear up some of his own clothing to use as bandages.

He pours on olive oil and wine. The alcohol in the wine would disinfect the wound; the olive oil would keep the wound moist.

This also tells us that the Samaritan may have been traveling with two animals if he is carrying olive oil and wine: one animal to carry him and a pack animal to carry all his stuff. This makes him an even likelier target for bandits.

He puts him on his own animal and leads him to an inn. The Samaritan spends the night at the inn with the man he has rescued.

The Samaritan gives two denarii to the innkeeper and tells him to attend to the man. A denarii is a day's wage. Fare at the inn for one night would have been about 1/10 denarii. Innkeepers were notoriously untrustworthy. The Samaritan encourages the innkeeper to help the man by promising to return with more money.

Second Move: Being Generous Toward Victims

The popular understanding of the parable is that we should be generous toward victims. I believe it means more than that, but let's first explore what generosity toward victims means.

Who is a victim? Victim can be defined as a person who has suffered harm, either randomly or at the hands of another.

Why don't the priest and the Levite help the victim? The orthodox interpretation through the centuries was that they didn't want to violate the purity laws by coming into contact with a dead person or a half-dead person. Most commentators today reject that interpretation. Amy-Jill Levine points out that any restrictions on touching a dead person are outweighed by the commandment in the Law to help a person in need.

The priest and the Levite could have had other concerns. They may be afraid of exposing themselves to danger from the same robbers. Focusing their attention on the injured man would have made them especially vulnerable.

The priest and the Levite may have felt like they were busy, important people, pressed for time. An experiment with students from Princeton Theological Seminary illustrates this. The students were told to go to a meeting in an adjacent building. Half of them were told that it would be a few minutes before they will be ready for them. The other half were told, "You're late." Each group passed a man who was slumped in a doorway, coughing and groaning. Of the students who thought they had time, 60% stopped to help. Of the students who thought they were late, only 10% stopped.

The priest and the Levite may have rationalized that the injured man brought it on himself. He should have know better than to go on this road. People are more inclined to help innocent victims. People send money to help victims of hurricanes and tornados. People are not so eager to help someone who they believe created their own problems by laziness, immorality or lack of foresight. They get what they deserve.

Seeing a person in need can create anxiety within us. We want to put the victim out of our sight. Juliana Breines, a research psychologist at Brandeis University, says that victims threaten our sense that the world is a safe and moral place. Seeing injustice disturbs us. Studies show that people who believe that the world is a just place are happier, but their happiness comes at a cost. It may reduce their empathy for those who are suffering.

Dr. Breines says that the lack of justice is easier to bear if it is offset by compassion for those who have been oppressed. We are practicing restorative justice. We help the victims to restore them to justice.

This parable has affected the values of Western civilization. Rene Girard, a French scholar of world literature who has written extensively on scapegoating, says that the Bible is unique in the ancient world in lifting up the perspective of victims. The first example of this is in the Psalms. The psalmist often suffers from persecution and appeals to Yahweh for deliverance. The metanarrative of the people of Israel is about a people who were groaning in slavery in Egypt. Yahweh heard their cries and liberated them. The suffering servant in the servant songs in Second Isaiah is persecuted and bears the sins of the people. The New Testament reinterprets the servant songs: Jesus is the suffering servant. Jesus is an innocent victim who is made a scapegoat by the religious and political authorities. Nearly all other scapegoats in ancient literature are portrayed as deserving what they got. The Bible is a prophetic critique of scapegoating.

Girard says that postmodernism and relativism seem to have defeated the notion of universal values, but this presumption is overcome by concern for victims, which is more alive than ever in the modern world. Girard credits this concern for victims to the Bible. With the advent of the first planetary culture, we have seen the rise of concern for victims who suffer from historic injustices. Voices of women and people of color and indigenous peoples are being heard.

Third Move: Extending Love Your Enemies

The parable goes beyond the popular understanding that the morale of the story is to show concern for victims. If the point is to be generous to strangers in need on the road, the hero wouldn't need to be a Samaritan. An Israelite was already instructed to show compassion for a fellow Israelite. The purity codes in Leviticus 19:18 commanded the Israelite to love your neighbor as yourself. Neighbor was understood to mean a fellow Israelite.

John Dominic Crossan encourages us to see the Good Samaritan as more than just a good example. The Samaritan challenges stereotypes and forces us to reconsider the cultural teaching on who is an enemy.

The parable amplifies what it means to love your enemy. The enemy may love you before you love them. If the members of the audience identify with the man who was beaten, they are put in the position of accepting aid and comfort from the enemy. People are proud; it is hard to accept generosity from other people, let alone from your enemy.

We need to embrace this wisdom more than ever in our divided, fractious, relativistic age where facts are in the eye of the beholder,

The Good Samaritan sees only a victim. He doesn't look at the world through a binary lens. He doesn't ask the man about his politics. He doesn't care how rich or how poor he is. He doesn't care whether he has accepted Christ into his life.

A unitive consciousness is hard. Not everyone attains it, and those who do may only attain it in the mature stages of their faith journey.

It is hard to focus on the things that we have in common instead of the things that divide us. Israelites in the first century looked past their common history with Samaritans and their common reverence for the Pentateuch and seized on the differences. The Samaritans were not pure enough for the Israelites.

The enemy could be a neighbor, someone close to me. The enemy could be a victim.

The apostle Paul writes in Romans 2:11: "God shows no partiality." Dave Barnhart, a United Methodist minister in Birmingham, says that verse could have been a bumper sticker in the early church. It led the church to include Gentiles, eunuchs, foreigners, women and children within its community life.

If God shows no partiality, why should we? It is part of our biological inheritance to care for our family members. Jesus stretches us past biology to extend our concern to victims of injustice, especially when they come near to us.

The command to care for the widow, the orphan and the resident alien can be extended to apply to anyone near you who is in need. Empathy can transcend tribal and kinship boundaries.

The parables tell us what life in the kingdom is like. Who are the heroes in Luke's parables? The father shows love and forgiveness to the prodigal son. The beggar shows humility when compared with the Pharisee. The widow shows persistence to the unjust judge, as does the woman searching for the lost coin.

The kingdom is populated by people in everyday life. They include a certain Samaritan and a certain father who had two sons. People in the kingdom are stirred by pity. People in the kingdom are generous. The person you think of as an enemy could have more empathy than you do. They may be closer to the kingdom than you are.

Conclusion

Who is my neighbor? The Greek word for neighbor is *πλησίον*. It is an adverb and an adjective that means *near to*. As a noun, it means *one who is near to*.

Your neighbor is anyone who is near to you, even if they are your enemy. Especially if they are in need.

“Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for some have entertained angels unawares.” Heb 13:2 (KJV).

Copyright Donald F. Heath, Jr. 2019