

Sunday, March 9, 2025

Starting this past Wednesday, we began the 40 days of Lent, the season of the church year that shifts our focus towards Jesus' chief purpose in coming to us – a sacrifice through his suffering, death and resurrection for our salvation, and through this, providing our path to a renewed eternal relationship with our Creator God. Over these weeks, we'll walk the path Jesus walked as he turned toward Jerusalem, the City of David, where he would confront the powers that be and fulfill God's plan on a hill called Golgotha. We'll follow stories and people that Luke gave us in his gospel, stories that present polarities. Polarities are often considered opposites, with an either/or assumption: rest or growth; lost or found; shouting or silence, to name a few. These seeming opposites are the way we often live through the human experience. We box the things we experience, the people we encounter, in these opposing categories. It can create the tension of extreme points of view, extreme differences, feeling we have to choose a side.

Through the scriptures we explore over the next 6 weeks, we'll explore different dualities and why they may not always be either/or choices. Instead, we'll try to see them through Jesus' teaching as connected along a spectrum, a both/and, even bringing them full circle at times. Each week is an invitation to reconsider labels and definitions, to remind ourselves how Jesus redefined those categories and labels we cling to as humans.

Wednesday, we looked at the polarity of intention and action. Today, we'll look at how we see the stranger – and the neighbor. Join me now in listening to God speak to us through:

Lk 10: 25-37 (Common English Bible)

25 A legal expert stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to gain eternal life?"

26 Jesus replied, "What is written in the Law? How do you interpret it?"

27 He responded, "*You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.*"

28 Jesus said to him, "You have answered correctly. Do this and you will live."

29 But the legal expert wanted to prove that he was right, so he said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

30 Jesus replied, “A man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. He encountered thieves, who stripped him naked, beat him up, and left him near death. 31 Now it just so happened that a priest was also going down the same road. When he saw the injured man, he crossed over to the other side of the road and went on his way. 32 Likewise, a Levite came by that spot, saw the injured man, and crossed over to the other side of the road and went on his way. 33 A Samaritan, who was on a journey, came to where the man was. But when he saw him, he was moved with compassion. 34 The Samaritan went to him and bandaged his wounds, tending them with oil and wine. Then he placed the wounded man on his own donkey, took him to an inn, and took care of him. 35 The next day, he took two full days’ worth of wages and gave them to the innkeeper. He said, ‘Take care of him, and when I return, I will pay you back for any additional costs.’ 36 What do you think? Which one of these three was a neighbor to the man who encountered thieves?”

37 Then the legal expert said, “The one who demonstrated compassion toward him.”

Jesus told him, “Go, and do likewise.”

Sermon Title: “everything[in]between: stranger & neighbor”

This passage from Luke is one that has made it into the minds of our world and our vocabulary, even for people who don’t claim the Christian faith. We see huge medical facilities named “Good Samaritan.” A charity, Samaritan’s Purse, is an evangelical Christian organization providing aid to victims of war, natural disasters, famine. In Australia, there is a Good Samaritan Donkey Sanctuary. And there are “Good Samaritan” laws on the books of most states, that seek to protect from legal liability those who step in and provide medical aid, like CPR, when they are first upon an accident scene. In contemporary times, even if someone was not raised in a Christian household or has had exposure to Christian teachings, most Western people have a picture in their mind if you use the phrase “Good Samaritan.”

We’ve talked before about Samaritans through other sermon texts, and they came up in Ash Wednesday’s service scripture. Amy-Jill Levine, a Jewish New

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Testament scholar, in one of her books explored the depth of this story of Jesus, giving the historical and cultural background to this conflict and the hatred between Israelites and Samaritans. The Samaritans were people who had common ancestry – Abraham, Issac, Jacob – with the Jewish people of Galilee and Judea. They are part of the family tree that extended from Joseph and his sons Ephraim and Manasseh. They formed out of the northern kingdom that broke off after King Solomon’s death and established their capital in the city of Samaria. This is where King Ahab and Queen Jezebel eventually ruled from. After the Assyrian empire conquered this Northern Kingdom of Israel, many were taken away into exile, but some were left to maintain the agriculture there behind and eventually began intermarrying with the Assyrians. When the Judeans returned from their own exile into Babylon the land remained split – Samaria was in the middle; Galilee was above it; Judea and the city of Jerusalem south of it. So to get from one part of the Jewish territory to the other, you either had to go through Samaria, or swing way over to the west on the other side of the Jordan River to get to the other side of Jewish territory.

Samaritans aren’t Gentiles, and they still live in Israel today. They identify themselves as part of the Mosaic faith tradition – their holy text is the Torah, the first five books of the Bible and they followed Mosaic law, but do not believe the rest of what we call the Old Testament should be considered holy scripture. And they worshiped in a different location than Jerusalem, Mt. Gerizim – a major sticking point with their Jewish distant cousins. A lot of the differences are over correct worship, but through the years these people, “outsiders,” were assigned characteristics that made “them” into the villains and the Jewish people into the good guys. Stories of sacrificing children and women perpetually unclean because they never stopped menstruating. When Jesus and his disciples were turned away from a Samaritan village in Chapter 9, it fulfilled the stereotypes of what the disciples expected – and yet James and John were so infuriated they wanted to commit violence against the village. If we think of the conflicts between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland; the Sunni and Shi’ite Muslims in Iraq and Syria; you get a feel for the cultural and religious differences that turn former family members into the enemy, neighbors into strangers, and the conflict and eventual violence that evolves over who is an insider and who is an outsider.

To Jesus’ listeners, to hear the phrase “the good Samaritan” was an oxymoron – there were no good Samaritans in their black and white view of the

situation. After centuries of stereotypes, and conquering empires feeding those ancient conflicts into hatred – the old “divide and conquer” strategy – “good” and “Samaritan” wouldn’t be used in the same sentence. It would be like us hearing “the good rapist”, or “the good murderer” or “the good Hamas terrorist.”

With that background, let’s go into the Scripture. Following the disciples and Jesus’ experience with the Samaritan village, we come to a moment of teaching with a sometimes translated as legal expert. Most Jewish people weren’t literate; their learning was by listening and memorization. We know Jesus knew how to read Hebrew, because he read the scrolls in synagogues. This person, the legal expert, had the same skill set. He decided to put Jesus’ knowledge to the test. The Greek word translated as “test” is used in the story of Jesus’ temptation by Satan in the wilderness. So this expert’s testing of Jesus could be said to be playing a little of the “devil’s advocate.”

The religious expert starts out with a softball question: “What do I do to inherit eternal life?” Most Jewish people in the 1st century did believe in eternal life, with the exception of the Sadducees. Jesus uses his usual teaching technique – answering a question with a question: “What is written in the Law – and how do you read (or, interpret) it?” Jesus knows this man is literate, so: how would HE answer his own question?

The religious expert shows off his knowledge and recites verses from Deuteronomy and Leviticus, stating love of God and love of neighbor is what is written as law. Jesus said he answered correctly. But: Jesus’ response changes the question by the answer he provides. By using a shift in grammar in the Greek, Jesus sends a different message than just affirming what the religious expert stated. We English speakers don’t get it in translation. The religious legal expert used a grammatical form of the verb “to do” that implies a singular action, a one-time event. “What must I do to gain eternal life?” Jesus, in turn, responds with a grammatical form of the word “to do” that implies continuous action. He didn’t give this man an item for a task list. He used an imperative form of the verb and indicated that love of God and neighbor was a way of living; about the here and now, not about eternal life. We might say instead: “Do this continuously, and you will live a life of love.” We don’t have those nuances from the Greek in the English language. You have to add on the explanation of the difference with extra words – like I just did. Jesus turned this into a completely different question. Not,

“What can I do (once) to guarantee eternal life,” but “How do I act continuously in a way that shows love of God and neighbor in the here and now.”

That probably put the religious expert back on his heels a bit, but he wasn't going to let Jesus away so easily, so he threw another question out: well, then who is my neighbor? And this person expected an answer out of Torah. Other Jewish people, even – if they weren't always as devout, had messy lives, was the obvious answer. Jesus answered with – a story.

The story is one you probably knew even before the reading: three men who all encounter someone who has been beaten, robbed, and left for dead. Now, the naming of three often creates an expectation, and Jesus used expectation to build tension. For example: January, February, March! Peter, James and John! Larry, Moe and Curley! Father, Son and Holy Spirit! Right, we all know what follows in these trios. But – Jesus changed the trilogy. He starts with a priest of the Jewish temple ; then, a Levite, a temple assistant. The people listening would have guessed the third was ... an Israelite. But no. It was a Samaritan.

It was the equivalent of me saying, “Father, Son and.... Satan.” That's the verbal bomb that Jesus dropped in front of these 1st century Jewish listeners. All listeners, not just the religious expert, must have been squirming at that point. I'm sure it was going through their mind “Whoa, priests, Levites ... a Samaritan? Why would Jesus go there?” They're getting really uncomfortable. Surely the story will get back to loving fellow Jews, Israelites, the people that worship in the right way and talk in the right way? That's not where the story went.

Why did Jesus go there? Why did he use a hated enemy of the Jewish people for this example of love of neighbor? So now we come to the part we're not taught in Sunday School; our Mountain Movers's exploration of the story isn't going to go into the real punch of Jesus' teaching. Developmentally, they're not ready for the deeper nuances of this story. So, why did Jesus use the worst example he could come up with? The answer? He was turning the legal expert's answer back at him.

The legal expert had cited Deuteronomy 6 when he said “*You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind,*” Then, he tacked on Leviticus 19:18, “*and you shall love your*

neighbor as yourself.” But the legal expert left off the rest of that chapter of Leviticus, where it goes on to state in verses 33-34, “When an alien (read: foreigner) resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were once aliens in the land of Egypt.” Later in Israel’s holy texts, the prophet Ezekiel puts the resident alien on the same level as his fellow Israelites. Ezekiel stated “for the aliens who reside among you and have begotten children among you. They shall be to you as citizens of Israel; with you they shall be allotted an inheritance (of land) among the tribes of Israel. In whatever tribal boundaries aliens reside, there you shall assign them their inheritance, says the LORD God. (47:22-23) According to God’s Word, the resident alien, the foreigner, IS a neighbor, on equal standing morally with citizens of the land.

Stranger. Neighbor. We think of them as two distinct, separate things. How do we treat a stranger exactly like a neighbor? Scholars Amy-Jill Levine, who I referenced earlier and whose work helped me walk through this text, and her colleague Ben Witherington III say this in their commentary on Luke: “All people (feel the) need to determine who is the neighbor and who is the stranger.... In Jesus’ time, the issue of the Samaritans was one of neighbor (insider) and stranger (outsider)..... However, when it comes to love, whether one is an insider or an outsider, a neighbor or a stranger, does not matter: love is indiscriminate.” The religious expert was asking about insiders and outsiders, neighbors and strangers. Jesus shifts the conversation to a more important question: Neighbor or stranger, insider or outsider doesn’t matter. Both should manifest compassion. Both deserve mercy.

There is a fifth character in this story – the victim on the side of the road. We don’t think about him often. In early English editions of the Bible, the original subtitle of this parable was not “The Good Samaritan.” It was “The Parable of the Man who Fell among the Robbers.” Hearing that title changes the point of view of how you enter the story. So, what if we shifted perspective? What if we look at this parable as if we were the person whose life was taken away, beaten up and left to die? What if we had to look up through swollen eyes, caked with blood, every part of our body screaming in pain, and looked upon a dark skinned man with a strong foreign accent, reaching into their bag for something – only to realize with relief it was antiseptic and bandages? What if the hands of the

woman that lifted you up into her car were large, the lower voice and Adam's apple of your rescuer hinted at a body identity they no longer claimed? What if the turban the person wore, as they pulled out their credit card and paid for your medical care and a bed to lie in while you healed, was stained with your blood? Would you be willing to accept their compassion, their demonstration of love of neighbor??

Jay Lieu's book of Luke says this: "It is one thing to learn that the command to love encompasses anyone who is in need, even the outsider, the enemy; it is far more disturbing to have to acknowledge that the enemy or outsider may be more quick to show love than those who are certainly fellow 'insiders'." Are we, as professed followers of Jesus Christ, quicker to show the love of God and love of neighbor than those outside our circle of faith? Do we, as Jesus instructed, show mercy, show compassion, as the outward expression of our love God AND love our neighbor? Or, do we see it more from strangers to the Christian faith?

Like the religious expert, we want to read God's word and narrowly interpret its application. We're quick to assert that many strangers to the Bible would improve if they only were required to follow the directives of the Bible. But passing more laws doesn't legislate love of God and love of neighbor. Last week, in St. Clair County, a man who has lived among us for 30 years, who has worked continuously, raising a family, who has received a work visa, was arrested by ICE in a school parking lot while he was dropping one of his children off to school. Other children saw their friends' father taken away in handcuffs. The family does not know where he has been taken and cannot get answers. In St. Clair County. Isn't he a resident alien living among us? And therefore – isn't he, and his wife and children, our neighbor? Because, weren't we once resident aliens also, with our Scotch-Irish heritage?

Jesus' teachings are sometimes "in your face" – they aren't always meant to make us comfortable. And some of you may be saying "I don't like this interpretation of this parable. I prefer the interpretation that puts us in the shoes of the three walking down the road. I want to be asked to please act nice like the Samaritan. I believe that I would always do the Christian thing, and be nice to help someone suffering so badly."

That is a perfectly legitimate interpretation of this text. Jesus' teachings are layered, complex, which is what continues to make this book so relevant through

the centuries, and relevant for today. So let's take the comfortable interpretation and just put ourselves in the traditional viewpoint – which of these three travelers are you? To answer the question they are answering up in Sunday School: Are you showing love of neighbor always? Are you ready not to avert your eyes, pretend you don't see people made in God's image stripped of their dignity? Are you ready to not cross to the other side of the road to avoid seeing the ripping away of someone's life? Are you ready to wade into the weeds at the edges of society, be part of supporting individuals who are mistreated, families that are harmed, keep children from being traumatized and left like trash? Then, follow that Sunday School lesson. It's also a legitimate interpretation of this text to just be nice. Nice isn't just a feeling though, a one time task. Jesus says it is continuous. And avoid averting our eyes from those in pain. It doesn't let us walk to the other side of the road to avoid dealing with the suffering of others.//

The religious expert couldn't even say the name of the person who showed love of neighbor. He couldn't even make himself say the word "Samaritan." He begrudgingly answered Jesus' question on who was a neighbor to the beaten man: "The one who demonstrated compassion toward him." And Jesus' words to him, and to anyone that would claim to be his disciple, his follower? "Go, and do likewise."

Amen.