

The Good Samaritan July 15, 2007

Most of us are familiar, to some degree, with the parable that has become known to us as the Good Samaritan. We are so familiar with it that I would dare to say that, if asked, we might forget **why** Jesus actually tells it at all. He is approached by a lawyer whose purpose is to test him. This is someone trained and versed in Jewish religious law; he is an expert, possibly even a scribe or Pharisee. Chances are, he already **has** the answer to his own question.... at least, the answer he wants.

The lawyer, of course, wants to know from Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus, as he is wont to do, turns the question back on him, and they both seem to agree that the Law is somewhat adamant about loving God and your neighbor. This does not seem to be in question. What **is** in question is who, exactly, one's neighbor **is**. So Jesus recites the parable about a man, ostensibly a Judean, who is walking the several miles stretch of the Jericho road, a road known to all for its dangers. And he is, indeed, robbed, beaten and left for dead.

Along comes a priest who, at the sight of the man, crosses over to the other side of the road. Then a Levite, who does the same. Then a Samaritan finds the man and, "moved with pity," pours olive oil for healing and wine as an antiseptic on the man's wounds, bandages them, brings him to an inn and pays the innkeeper to care for the man until he returns. Figure out which man was the neighbor to the guy left for dead?

Now, to the audience to whom Jesus is speaking, this is not as simple a story as it sounds to us. To them, the term "Good Samaritan" would be an oxymoron. You have to understand the relationship between Jews and Samaritans. Samaritans are half-breeds. You may remember that when the twelve tribes of Israel settled the Promised Land, what became the northern kingdom of Israel contained ten of those tribes, and the southern kingdom of Judah, the other two. When the Assyrians conquered and carted off the northern kingdom of Israel, they left some of the people behind. They, in turn, intermarried with other peoples of the area and what resulted were Samaritans.... unpure, unclean, half-breeds in the eyes of the Jews. And while the Samaritans claimed relationship to Abraham and Moses, and followed the teachings of the Torah, they built their own temple on Mt. Gerizim and did not pay homage to the temple in Jerusalem. Samaritans, in other words, were not neighbors; they were closer to refuse.

That the priest and the Levite in this story would have ignored the body in their path and crossed to the other side of the road would not have been seen by the crowd as something of which to be ashamed for a good reason. We have contemplated forever as to whether the priest and the Levite might have been late to a meeting, or have an emergency at home, or stopping would have put them also in danger of being attacked. But these things would not have been pertinent to these Jews. The more important fact is that if the man lying in the road was dead,

even if he was a Judean, the law did not permit the two men to go near him. It would have meant contamination. In the eyes of this lawyer and his friends, the priest and Levite not only did nothing wrong, they did everything right.

“Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” Jesus asked the lawyer. It’s a fair question and so the lawyer is forced to think about something he has never had to think about before. He is a Jew among Jews, and he has followed the law of the culture in which he has always lived, in which his fathers and mothers before him lived. He has always known who his neighbors were. They were other Jews, of course. He didn’t run into many Samaritans, at least he didn’t notice them much if he did, just as he didn’t hang out with Romans. His neighbors were the ones like him; they were Jews.

But Jesus’ definition of neighbor is a very different one. A neighbor is anyone in need. Not that anyone who is not in need is not a neighbor, for at one time or another (if not all the time) we are all in need. Even the lawyer had to admit that the Samaritan was the neighbor to the Judean in the ditch, because he had shown him mercy. Clean or unclean, the Samaritan didn’t first stop and check the man’s ethnic identity or, if he did, it didn’t seem to matter to him. He saved the life of another human being in need by showing him mercy and pity. Jesus is proclaiming to the lawyer and his friends not simply a new definition of neighbor, but a new way to live. “Go and do likewise,” he tells them. And by the way, the Samaritans would have been equally revolted by this story. Why, after all, would a good Samaritan stop to help an unworthy and arrogant Judean?

Many of us know the story of John Newton, the composer of the hymn, *Amazing Grace*. Many of us know that he was a slave trader who had a religious conversion during a storm at sea, after which he penned the words, “Amazing grace! how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.” It is a very moving story and I think about it every time I sing that hymn. But the other day I came across the next part of that story, written by a man named Mark McMinn for the magazine, *Christianity Today*:

(Newton’s) eyes may have been opened on that dismal night, but not wide enough. Upon his return to Liverpool, Newton promptly signed on as mate of another ship and sailed to Africa, where the Christian traveled from village to village buying human beings and returning them as cargo. He then sailed across the Atlantic, studying a Latin Bible in his quarters as 200 slaves lay in the hull, shackled two by two, squeezed into shelves like secondhand books. As many as a third died during the long voyage across the ocean, and many more suffered serious illnesses. When the ship arrived in Charleston, South Carolina, Newton delivered these men, women, and children into a life of toil and oppression while he sat in church services and took leisurely strolls through fields and

woods outside Charleston.

It is not as difficult to see the mess in others' lives as it is to see the mess in our own. For years, Newton had no notion that slavery was evil – few Christians of his day did. (May, 2004; reprinted in *Synthesis*, 7/11/04)

When **we** read the entire parable of the Good Samaritan, our response is, most likely, “Well, of course.” The Samaritan was the one who showed mercy and pity, and then put his money where his mouth was. He **cared** and then he **acted** like he cared. Even the lawyer got the fact that the Good Samaritan was also the Good Neighbor. He got it. But, I’m pretty sure he still didn’t get that the priest and Levite had done anything wrong. After all, Jesus never said that the priest or Levite didn’t pity the man. All he said was that they crossed over to the other side of the road, and my assumption is they had no cell phones to call 911. They walked away, as far as we know, to follow the law’s precept. They wouldn’t even have touched the deceased body of a relative. If any of us had been in that culture, we would have done the exact same thing; we would have agreed with the lawyer. “It is not as difficult to see the mess in others’ lives as it is to see the mess in our own.”

But Jesus was trying to show them another way, a better way, to live. It was no longer enough to shake their heads and say, as maybe the priest and Levite did, “Such a shame; I feel for him.” Jesus now gave a new commandment for anyone who would follow him, and that commandment was, “Go and **do** likewise.” If you see the pain and you feel the pity, don’t cross over to the other side of the road, don’t shackle and enslave God’s beloved human beings, don’t just sit there, go.... and **DO** something about it. As the Samaritan did, “go and **DO** likewise.”

No one ever said that we human beings, or we Christians, do not care about other people. We do; we care very much. We care about the people dying needlessly in Darfur; we care about people dying in Iraq and Afghanistan, both American and indigenous; we care about the poor and the homeless; and we care about Aunt Sadie who is sick in Colorado. We care and we feel more pity than, at times, we can possibly stand. There are days when we wish there was such a thing as a self-help book on how to harden one’s heart. We care deeply. But Jesus didn’t just tell the lawyer “Congratulations! You’ve gotten the right answer to my question of which man was the neighbor.” He told him to “Go and **DO** likewise.”

I have new neighbors three doors down the street, whose house my windows face. I miss the people who moved out. And they had the only snowblower on the street, and would clear the snow from the driveways of all the single women. They moved out and these new folks arrived this spring while I was out of town. He rides a motorcycle and she walks a dog the size of a horse. All of this I can see from my window. And from my window, where I have checked them out, I can tell that I’ll probably like them. But I have yet to go over and welcome them to the neighborhood. I have yet to invite them to church. The time is never right. I don’t want to

bother them and I'm always in the middle of something when they are outside. Would it even matter to them if I went over to welcome them? Well, actually, it may matter a great deal. I just don't **do** it.

When we care, and that we do is not in question, but when we care, Jesus is asking us.... no Jesus is commanding us.... to "go and **do**". Opening one's wallet is the easy part. Stopping to bandage another's wounds is much harder. Last week Jesus sent his disciples out into the harvest to **do**, and they **did** astonishing things. Today, he sends us.

Luke 10:25-37

July 15, 2007 – 7 Pentecost (Proper 10C)

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All Saints Episcopal Church – Sharon Chapel: www.sharonchapel.org

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