

Year C Proper 15 Luke 10 25 to 37

This story of the Good Samaritan is one of Jesus' most well-known stories. Even people who don't go to church have some inkling that a Samaritan is held up as an example of a good and compassionate person because of the widespread use of this biblical story to name various organizations. The Good Samaritan Inn in South Porcupine was a homeless shelter for men. The Samaritan's Purse is a charitable organization that runs Operation Christmas Child, filling shoe boxes each December to send to under-privileged children around the world. Many countries have "Good Samaritan" laws that protect people who step in to dicey situations to help others. We may think that we know this story and all it has to teach us but there is more to this story than being shown an example of a good and compassionate man for us to follow.

The "lawyer" who stands up to test Jesus would have been a law expert – as in a Torah law expert. This person likely would have known the answer to the question he asked Jesus: How do I inherit eternal life? Why ask if you already know the answer? Perhaps he wanted to confirm what he believed. Maybe he wanted more detail. Perhaps, since Jesus was such an authoritative and convincing teacher, maybe this lawyer wanted those who did not believe in the resurrection of the dead to hear what Jesus had to say.

Whatever the reason, this lawyer asks Jesus how he may inherit eternal life and, as is very typical of Jesus, he turns the question around on him and asks what the law says – this person *is* an expert after all. Our translation isn't the greatest here. It sounds like Jesus is simply asking the lawyer the same thing twice: "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" It is more accurately translated as, "What is written in the law? How do you *interpret* what is written?"

The lawyer gives a good answer using two different passages of scripture. The first is the *shema* – the “Hear, O Israel” that we have in our BAS’s – every young Jewish person learns the *shema* and repeats it daily: Love God with heart, soul, strength, and mind. This is in Deuteronomy. The second piece of scripture is in Leviticus: Love your neighbour as yourself. Together, they are what we would call the two great commandments. This is, of course, a good answer and Jesus tells him so. It isn’t good enough to know the answer, though, Jesus says. *Do these things*, he says, and you will live.

At this, the lawyer asks him for a clarification. If he is going to do these things, he wants to know who his neighbour is. We hear that he wanted to “justify himself.” He could have been looking for confirmation that he was already loving his neighbours. Jesus responds by telling him a shocking story that makes clear that the lawyer’s idea of “neighbour” was almost certainly not inclusive enough.

A man leaving Jerusalem is accosted by bandits on his way to Jericho. They rob him of everything, including his clothes, and beat him until he is half dead. Shocking bit #1 is that both a priest and a Levite see that there is a robbery victim lying half dead by the side of the road and they both pass by him without stopping to help. Priests and Levites lived lives dedicated to God, worked in the Temple, knew the scriptures inside out, served a God of love and compassion but did not show this in their actions. They did not practice what they preached. This display of neglect of a person in need would have shocked Jesus’ audience then just as it would shock us to hear the story of a lifeguard turning his back on a drowning man.

Shocking bit #2 is that a Samaritan stops to help the victim in the dust of the roadside. As we just talked about recently, when James and John asked if they should rain fire down on a Samaritan village that didn't welcome Jesus, we learned that – although the Samaritans and Jewish people share common ancestors, there is absolutely no love lost between them at this point in history...and that's an understatement. Jesus' Jewish audience would not be enjoying the fact that a Samaritan had become the hero of the story. Samaritans were the rejected "other." They did not belong. And Jesus goes into great detail about the compassion and care and generosity this Samaritan gives to the person in need and displays to the world. He tends his wounds, brings him to an inn, stays with him to care for him, and leaves enough money with the innkeeper to cover the injured man's food and lodging for the next 24 days.

The compassion of the Samaritan is very significant in this story. Luke uses the term *esplagnisthe* ("he had compassion"). This term occurs just three times in all of Luke; in the other two instances, only God's agent, Jesus (Luke 7:13) and a figure for God, the father of the Prodigal (Luke 15:20) show compassion. In other words, "showing compassion" in Luke's Gospel is God's domain. At the end of the story when the lawyer is asked who was a neighbour to victim on the road, he replies, "The one who showed mercy to him." As with "compassion," virtually every instance of "mercy" in Luke is associated with acts of God or God's agent, Jesus.¹ The Samaritan is doing God's work.

¹ (Luke 1:47-50, 54, 72, 78; 17:13; 18:38-39; the only exception is when Father Abraham refuses to show the rich man "mercy" [16:24], an exception which ultimately proves the rule that in Luke's Gospel only God and Jesus show mercy)

These tangible actions of care displayed by the Samaritan are what neighbours do for their neighbours. They display the love, compassion, and generosity of God especially to the rejected “others” of society. We may not have Samaritans among us but we certainly have “others.” For some the “other” is the immigrant. For some it’s gay people. For others it’s the poor with their hands out, or sick people, or fat people, or crippled people...the list is endless. Having a Samaritan display the qualities of God erases the boundary lines of “us” and “them”. There is to be no “others”, just one human family of God.

Another shocking bit of the story that easily goes unnoticed is that this Samaritan who helps out a person in need is in the vicinity of Jerusalem. He is on the road between Jerusalem and Jericho and so has either just come from – or is going to – Jerusalem. This is crucial information in our story. It wasn’t out of character for him to help a stranger in need, to show compassion and generosity. He was living a life of reconciliation, coming and going among his Jewish neighbours, spending time in their most holy city. This reconciliation between the Samaritans and the Jews was a recurring element in Luke’s Gospel.

This is important because, as I mentioned earlier, the Samaritans and Jews shared common ancestry. The Samaritans descended from among the 12 tribes of Israel but Israel had split into two separate kingdoms hundreds of years earlier. The Day of the Lord that the Jewish people awaited was to be the perfecting of God’s kingdom which we, too, await. Part of this perfection was understood to be the restoration of Israel – all 12 tribes back together, in harmony. The inclusion of the Samaritan as the hero of Jesus’ story was a signal to the lawyer and the other listeners that this restoration of Israel had begun.

This part of the story gives us our “why” – why we love our neighbours as ourselves. It is not simply that we are nice people. We are ministers of reconciliation, sharing in God’s purpose to reconcile all people and all things through the love of Christ. Moving through life, we move ourselves, our neighbours, and the world toward the fulfillment of God’s purpose.

The small city of Billings, Montana prided itself on being a safe, caring place to live. Its citizens were greatly disturbed, therefore, when a rash of hate crimes began. Acts of vandalism – including painted on words of hate and swastikas – were directed against all of the city’s visible minorities...black people, Jews, and Indigenous people. One particularly frightening act was the throwing of a brick through the bedroom window of a young Jewish child who had a menorah on her window ledge. Her menorah is the candle holder with nine branches to hold 9 candles lit during Hanukkah.

The town decided to actively move against this hatred of the “other”. This was not who they were and not who they were going to allow themselves to become through inaction. Among other acts of love and care, the local newspaper printed a full-colour, full-page representation of a menorah. “Thousands of Billings residents cut the paper menorah out and displayed it in their windows. By late December, driving around Billings was a remarkable experience. Nearly ten thousand people were displaying those paper menorahs in their windows, and the menorahs remained in place throughout the eight days of Hanukkah. It was a brilliant answer to the hate-monger: A town that had a few Jews was saying with one collective voice, “We are all Jews now.” It was an elimination of the “other” through love and compassion. That Jewish child who had so innocently displayed

her menorah in the window helped set in motion a chain of events that affirmed in many other cities 'We are different but we are one.' (story adapted from *Chicken Soup for the Soul 101 Stories of Faith*, p.146).

I turn once more to Mother Teresa for her wisdom. She says, "It is not how much we do, but how much love we put in the doing. It is not how much we give, but how much love we put in the giving" (*Chicken Soup for the Soul 101 Stories of Faith*, p.143). The Samaritan in our story didn't just *help* the victim lying in the dust of the road, he didn't just do the bare minimum required. The Samaritan lavished the love and compassion and generosity of God on this person in need. "Go and do likewise," says Jesus.