

Luke 10:25-37 The Good Samaritan

Last week I spoke about some of the great stories of the Bible that have a larger appeal than to people of faith. One such story is the Parable of the Good Samaritan. People may not know what a Samaritan is but they know that the phrase refers to someone who does a good deed. There are hospitals named after The Good Samaritan and “good neighbor” awards given to those who get caught in the act of helping others and Good Samaritan laws which protect people from liability who stop and help those who are in distress. I have seen references in passing to it in movies and TV shows. It is buried deep into our cultural psyche. A Good Samaritan is someone who goes out of the way to help a stranger, sometimes far and above any reasonable expectation.

Origins and Background

The story itself is told only in the Gospel of Luke. It is not an account of a real historical event, but a parable that Jesus told in response to a question. A little background is always helpful.

Samaria was an ancient city that served as the capital of the old northern Kingdom of Israel during the time of the divided monarchy between the end of Solomon’s reign and the Babylonian Exile. It is where Ahab and Jezebel held court. After the fall of the northern kingdom in the 8th century, that is, the 700’s BCE, most of the people were killed, sent off into slavery, or else married into the surrounding cultures.

We speak of the lost 10 tribes of Israel because they no longer have any kind of national or ethnic identity. There is, however, a small group which maintains its Israelite heritage, and lives in the region where the old northern kingdom was, with Samaria as its capital; thus they are called Samaritans.

In the time of Jesus, this small group of people lived just to the south of Galilee and to the north of Judea and Jerusalem with its famous temple. They were despised by the Jews because they remained loyal to the traditions of the divided monarchy and worshipped in Samaria instead of Jerusalem, and because they were not ethnically pure.

Very often Jewish people, when they travelled between Judea and Galilee, would avoid the direct route through Samaria and take the long way around. There was a rivalry between the two groups.

Sometimes Jesus went straight through and in the Gospel of John he encountered a Samaritan woman, who is known as “the woman at the well.” In this parable, his use of the character of the Samaritan in a positive light as an illustration is meant to be provocative. I don’t want to go too far, but maybe it would be like telling a story about the good Russian or the good Muslim.

The Dialogue

The story comes up because of a dialogue between Jesus and some of the religious leaders of his day.

Often these conversations were contentious, like the media in our times asking our politicians trick questions hoping they will say something controversial that might cause them political harm and sell more papers or raise their ratings or get more hits on their websites.

A certain expert in the law asked Jesus about the requirements for salvation. Jesus returned the question. The lawyer quoted from Exodus and Leviticus, “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength and mind,” and, “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus affirmed this answer and it is important that we affirm it too. The meaning of life is found in relationships and nowhere else, not material things or money or power. The supreme commands are summed up in one idea, divine love, love that is concerned with the well-being of others before self. The lawyer got the answer right and Jesus affirmed him. The conversation could have ended here, but the standard of divine love is high and few achieve it perfectly.

So in order to justify himself the lawyer asks his famous question, “and who is my neighbor?” Thus Jesus is prompted to his parable.

The Parable

The story itself is simple. On the way from Jerusalem to Jericho a man fell among thieves, was beaten, robbed, and left for dead. A couple of highly respected religious people came by and acted as if

nothing happened. Then a despised Samaritan came and seeing the man on the side of the road, bound up his wounds, took him to an inn and arranged for his care at his own expense.

And then Jesus asked the lawyer and he may as well have come here today to ask us, “which of these was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of thieves?” And of course the answer, “the one who had mercy on him.” Interestingly, the lawyer’s question is not answered directly. Jesus just said, “go and do likewise,” so his answer is that we should not focus on who our neighbors are, but on making sure that we ourselves are good neighbors.

Something Interesting

Because the image of the Good Samaritan is so well known and has been preached about so very much, it is very difficult to say something unique and interesting about it to add to your understanding. Perhaps it is best just to present it again and let it speak for itself, and set you thinking.

But there is something important to say. In the face of the radical individualism of our culture, and in the face of the news, we are becoming more and more divided, more isolated, more in need of friendship and community than ever before. We are divided racially, economically, politically, and religiously and our suspicions are rising that our neighbors are our enemies and can’t be trusted.

More and more the world needs someone to be like the Good Samaritan. The lawyer was looking for an excuse. In our times excuses abound:

Our neighbors are too liberal
Our neighbors are too conservative
Our neighbors are Mexican
Our neighbors are gay
Our neighbors are Muslim
Our neighbors are atheist
Our neighbors are young
Our neighbors drink too much
Our neighbors smoke too much
Our neighbors have tattoos
Our neighbors are poor
Our neighbors are rich
Our neighbors threaten us

I see the news about the police shootings and terrorist attacks and wonder if we are just going to have an all out on TV who defend one side or the other. I see those who protest for change or carry signs to support their side. Sometimes I wonder if we really think the change we need will come that way. I do not believe it will.

It will come the hard way, in millions of grind-it-out personal encounters between anonymous people like the Samaritan and this stranger; come to think of it, like us. It will only come in uncomfortable encounters between people who take the time to talk to one another and get to know one another. No one really knows how to do it but there is hope as long as we

are willing. We will have to figure it out as we go along.

There are 7 or 8 billion people on this planet and the answer to the lawyer's question is that every last one of them is our neighbor and we are theirs. We are to love them. We are to be like the Good Samaritan, and to look for that quality in others. We are meant to take care of each other. All the news tells us is that we are not doing a very good job of it. We should be humbled by that news, but not devastated. We are not without divine help. And we are not alone in trying.

But all this makes it sound like it is a chore. The Gospel message for us today is that we can also be assured that in the friendships we make along the way, we will find our true selves; know the greatest joy, the surest peace.

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