Bad Samaritan

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Luke 10:25-37

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I have a distinct memory of acting out this Good Samaritan parable from Sunday school days. My teacher assigned me the role of playing a robber in this Good Samaritan story. I’ll admit I went a little overboard on my classmate playing the role of the man going down from Jerusalem. The pastor had to be called in to talk with me about my rowdy behavior. I was just doing my job, I explained.

I have avoided preaching on this Good Samaritan parable in recent years. Don’t get me wrong, I love the parable, but I don’t like what we have done with it. We have turned this parable into a mushy morality tale. You know, be like the Good Samaritan and show kindness to strangers. We have tamed this provocative story and blunted its impact. When Jesus first spoke this parable, it had a real edge to it. It was scandalous, subversive, even. It created controversy.

Our story opens with a lawyer asking Jesus a question. How appropriate, given that this metro area is flush with attorneys. This lawyer is an expert in biblical law, what the Bible calls a scribe. He asks Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” (10:25). Circle the word do in the question. We will come back to it later in this sermon.

Jesus answers the lawyer’s question with two questions of his own: “What is written in the law? and, How do you read it?” (10:26). In classic rabbinic style, Jesus answers a question with a question.

The lawyer fields Jesus’ question cleanly. He cites two well-known passages from the Torah. The first originates from the great Shema, from a section of Deuteronomy that is central to Judaism: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind” (Deuteronomy 6:5). The second passage is also a time-honored favorite, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18).

Jesus summarizes biblically elsewhere in the gospels with these same two Old Testament passages (Matthew 22:34-40). Either, this lawyer has heard Jesus’ teaching on the subject or has independently come to the same conclusion.
Jesus commends him for his insightful answer. “Do this and you will live” (10:28).

The lawyer then asks a follow-up question: “But wanting to justify himself, he asks Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’” (10:29). Pay close attention to Luke’s words, “But wanting to justify himself.” This lawyer expects Jesus to justify his interpretation of neighbor to correspond to anyone who shares his race and religion.

This is the point in the story where Jesus launches into this Good Samaritan parable. Let me clarify something. There is no place in the parable itself where our protagonist goes by the moniker Good Samaritan.

Jesus begins, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho” (10:30). The anonymity of this man is intentional on Jesus’ part. He functions as a universal man, representing anyone in need.

This lawyer would immediately identify the 15-mile stretch of road from Jerusalem to Jericho. It’s called the Blood Way for good reason. It is a notorious highway where robbers prey on unsuspecting travelers. Sure enough, the man going from Jerusalem is robbed, beaten and left for dead by the side of the road.

A priest walks by. His return from Jerusalem suggests he is on his way home from temple duties. He sees the man in the ditch yet passes by on the other side. How stunning that a man of the cloth chooses to ignore the injured man’s plight.

Next, a Levite walks by. Levites assist priests in religious duties so they are religious professionals also. It’s the same story, second verse. He sees the man yet passes by on the other side also. The cadence in the way Jesus tells this parable is deliberate. Both priest and Levite come and see, yet pass by on the other side.

This lawyer may be thinking Jesus has an anti-cleric message up his sleeve. Perhaps Jesus creates a scenario where an ordinary Jew will come
Instead, Jesus says, “A Samaritan came and saw yet unlike the other two, took pity on the man in the ditch” (10:32).

While the other two come and see yet pass by on the other side, this Samaritan comes, sees and shows compassion to the man in the ditch.

Inserting a Samaritan into the role of a hero constitutes a shocking development in this parable. There was bad blood between Jews and Samaritans (John 4:9). Samaritans were considered rogue Jews. They married Gentiles, worshiped at different temples and read different Bibles. There was no such thing as a Good Samaritan. There were only bad Samaritans. The only Good Samaritan was a dead Samaritan.

Yet, this Samaritan is the one who binds up the man’s wounds, helps him to his feet and accompanies him to the Jericho Inn. I count twelve specific acts of compassion on the part of this despised Samaritan. The sheer number of words Jesus devotes to this Samaritan tells us something. He uses 40 words in leading up to the Samaritan’s help and 60 words to chronicle his step-by-step rescue.

Jesus asks this lawyer, “Which of the three was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” (10:36). He ignores the man’s question, “Who is my neighbor?” Instead, he asks which of the three acted in neighborly fashion.

The lawyer can’t quite bring himself to utter the word Samaritan. He simply answers, “The one who had mercy on him” (10:37). Our story closes with Jesus’ words, “Go and do likewise.” Luke leaves the story open-ended. Will the lawyer who heard Jesus’ Word now do it?

So what difference does this sermon make in my life? Two applications come to mind. One addresses us as Jesus’ followers. The other corresponds to what we discover about Jesus from this story.

First, let’s consider our role as Jesus’ followers. Let me go back to the question the lawyer asked at the outset of this parable: “What can I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus emphatically teaches that we contribute nothing to our salvation.
When someone asked Martin Luther what we contribute to salvation, he famously replied, “We contribute sin and resistance.” Jesus says there is nothing we can possibly do to earn our way into heaven. Yet, there are things we can do in this parable to follow in the way of Jesus. Jesus’ initial exchange with the lawyer ends with the words, “Do this and you will live” (10:28). After Jesus recounts this parable, he tells the lawyer, “Go and do likewise” (10:37).

What can we do? We can act like good neighbors. Neighbor in the Greek literally translates, “one who is near.” The issue for Jesus in this parable is one of proximity, not ethnicity or religion. Jesus challenges the conventional wisdom of his day about the limits of neighbor love. This lawyer wants Jesus to narrow his scope to define neighbors as people who share his culture and custom. Jesus widens the aperture to include everyone.

We are reading Luke’s gospel this year with three commitments in mind: commitment to the person of Christ, commitment to the body of Christ and commitment to the work of Christ in the world. This parable has the work of Christ written all over it. Who is our neighbor? Refugees, illegal immigrants, political liberals or conservatives, homeless, enemies and people who annoy us. Like I said, this parable was subversive and remains so today.

Our second so-what application concerns what we learn about Jesus from this parable. I often associate with this Good Samaritan in this parable. Jesus wants me to act like a Good Samaritan and show mercy to people. Who am I kidding? I also resemble this man by the side of the road. I have been this man in the ditch. I need Jesus’ rescue. I cannot save myself.

As many times as I have read this Good Samaritan parable and preached it, there is one aspect of this story that never dawned on me before now. The insight is so simple I don’t know how I missed it. I am this man in the ditch and Jesus is my Good Samaritan. Reading old sermons by St. Augustine and John Calvin is what did it for me. Jesus not only calls us to be Good Samaritans, he serves as our Good Samaritan. He embodies this
Good Samaritan. The prophet Isaiah foretold a coming Messiah who would be “despised and rejected by men” (53:3). Other people, my equivalent priests and Levites, invariably fail me. Jesus comes through for me. Jesus finds me in the ditch. He binds up my wounds. Sin knocks me to the curb but Jesus helps me to my feet. He puts me on the road again. He even covers the cost of my rehabilitation. The words of an 1878 hymn come to mind, “Jesus paid it all. All to him I owe.” Incidentally, the originator of this hymn, Elvina Hall, composed this hymn while sitting in a choir loft listening to a preacher that did not know when to quit.

Come to Jesus. He offers you rescue. He saves and redeems. No one can save you the way Jesus can. He will bind up your broken heart. He will set you on course again. His compassion is available for the asking. Come to Jesus.

Dear God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
Open our ears to hear your Word and do what Jesus says. Open our eyes to see people the way you see them. Open our hearts to feel the compassion you feel for people. Open our hands to extend mercy.

Forgive us when we pass by on the other side of the road. Lord, have mercy on us.

We thank you that you send Jesus Christ to be our Good Samaritan. You find us in the ditch. You bind up our wounds. You set us on our feet again.

We open ourselves to your great love, some of us for the first time telling you that we want to follow Jesus with our lives. Amen.