

July 11, 2010

Scripture: Luke 10: 25-37

Sermon: "The Good Samaritan"

This is one of the most familiar stories in the Bible. It has even become part of our secular world. We have hospitals named Good Samaritan. We give away Good Samaritan awards for people who go beyond their duty. The phrase "Good Samaritan" is a huge part of our vocabulary.

And I am sure that we have all heard dozens of sermons about the Good Samaritan. The Good Samaritan sees the person in the ditch and gave him care. And God wants us to do the same. Go out and show God's love to all. Amen.

This story is really popular among Sunday school curriculum. We grew up with this story. And we were told that we are supposed to love our neighbors. I even remember one year as a camp counselor we had to design a worship service surrounding this text. We had the youth act the parts. We gave a little message about we should love our neighbors and I believe we even played a James Taylor's song, "Shower the people you love with love." The youth understood that we were supposed to show God's love to all. We as camp counselors felt as if we had done our job. That the youth could and would leave the camp, knowing that they are supposed to shower the people that they love with love, that they were going to shower their neighbors with love. All's well that end's well on that week of camp.

And as I began to prepare this sermon, I kept coming back to that camp experience and something was bothering me. I couldn't quite put my finger on it. We as camp counselors gave the youth what we thought was a good message. Care for those people you love. Show those people you love that you love them. Love your neighbor. People that you meet on the street. People that you sit beside in the pew. People that you know. That is what God is calling us to do in this story right?

So I thought, Well, since I was so inspired by James Taylor those many years ago as I dealt with this text at camp, I'll put on the song again and waited for my sermon to come through. And as James Taylor sang, "Shower the People you love with Love. Show them the way you feel. Things will work just fine, if you will only shower the people you love with love, I realized that I had done a great disservice to those youth so many years ago. I realized that I had missed the point of the parable. "Shower the people that you love with love". I gave them permission to put boundaries on whom they were supposed to show unconditional mercy. We had told the youth to love their neighbor. We had also given the youth permission to define who their neighbor was and who their neighbor was not.

So I want us to take another look at the beginning of this story again. The part that we are not as familiar with: Read verses 25-29.

We see that Jesus is traveling on his way to Jerusalem and he is stopped by a lawyer needing a little clarification. Basically, he is asking Jesus to give him "faith in a nutshell". Jesus, in twenty words or less, tell what I need to do to get eternal life. The lawyer believes that the main reason for being a person of faith is receiving eternal life. It is already promised to him and he wants to

know what he has to do to get to this reward without any of the hassles. That is his faith goal. That is why he claims to be a person of faith Eternal life. And Jesus responds, What does the law say?

And the lawyer says, Love your God with all your heart, all your mind, and all our soul. And you should love your neighbor as well.

And Jesus says, Good answer. You know what you must do so go out there and do it. It can't be that simple. Where's the catch? So we are told that the lawyer wants to justify himself. "Look, Jesus, here's why I am asking this question. Eternal life is my goal so I have done all that stuff we talked about what the law says to do. I love God. I give to charity. I let people know that I love them. So, I'm good right? I'm getting that big reward right? I have got this eternal life locked up right? I know that I can be a person of faith because I know I'm getting eternal life.

I just need to make sure that I have got all bases covered. I just need to know one more thing. Who is my neighbor? Just give me this in twenty words or less.

And then Jesus tells this story. Jesus uses a method of popular teaching at that time. The teacher usually began by telling a story involving a priest, a Levite and usually the story would end with the person who was living out their faith who was just like the main audience. Someone who acts like the audience, talks like the audience. Someone the audience would shower their love with because that person is loved by them.

And so Jesus begins this story. And his audience is probably thinking, I have heard this story before. I could tell this story myself. He's going to talk about the priest. He's going to talk about the Levite. He tells about the person who is like me.. Yada, Yada, Yada.

All of a sudden: The word "Samaritan" is in the story. Wait, what Jesus! You can't do that! That's not how the story goes. You used a Samaritan. You used a person that is so different from me. That is not someone that we love. That is not someone that we want to shower our love on. They are not my neighbor. They are not even people that I want to associate with. We don't want to claim them as our neighbors. They are not like us at all. They are not the people we would have chosen to be the example of faith. They can't even get eternal life according to our laws!

Jesus, you are opening up a whole can of worms. And I am not sure we like what you are telling us. Are you saying that the "Samaritan is precisely the one whom we do not expect to stop beside us on the road, the one by whom we do not want to be picked up in our battered condition, the one by whom we do not want to be loved? Are you saying that we are to shower our love on people who are the other and also allow them to show us with their love as well? As Jesus finishes the story, he asks which of these do you think was a neighbor to the man? The lawyer cannot even say the word: Samaritan. He simply says the one who showed mercy. And Jesus responds: Go and do likewise.

Who is my neighbor? The people that I see everyday. The people that I think are acceptable. The people that I choose to show care to. That's who is my neighbor. That's all I need to care about.

That is what I need to base my faith on. That is how I can define my faith. I say who is my neighbor. Right?

And we are told no. The Good News is that We don't get to define who is our neighbor. We don't get to say who is worthy of mercy. We don't say who is worthy of love. Only God is able to do that. And we realize that the commandment that God has given us is based on a love that does "not arise out of our goodwill, or piety; it does not consist of our imitation of the Good Samaritan or Jesus. It is not something we can create for ourselves. We realize that this commandment to love our neighbor is like when God first loved us simply because we are God's own, simply because we are God's beloved, simply because we are one of God's children. Jesus reminds us to look beyond ourselves and our definitions as our basis for our faith. Jesus reminds us to look beyond the boundaries that we set as the basis of our faith. Jesus reminds us to look beyond the easy answers as basis for our faith.

Jesus wants us to remember that God first loved us. That God first showed us who our neighbors were. And that is the basis for our faith. That is why we show justice for all of God's creation. That is why we show compassion to all of God's children. That is why we claim to be people of faith. It is because God first loved us.

God first loved us regardless of our faults, regardless of our turning away from God, regardless of who we claim to be. God first saw us and loved us. God showed us unconditional mercy. And that is what we are called to do. To show unconditional mercy to all of God's children. And that is our basis for being people of faith, for being people of God. Not right answers or getting into heaven. Our basis for our faith is because God first loved us.

God is pushing us out of our comfort zone. God is pushing us to expand our definition of neighbor. God is giving us "faith in a nutshell": I first showed unconditional mercy to you. Now go and do likewise."

God first saw us in the ditch. God first saw us hurting. God first saw us and showed us compassion. God did not ask if we were believers. God did not ask if we went to church on Sunday mornings.

God saw us as one of God's own children. God saw us. God saw us.

And God showed us compassion. That is why we are in a relationship with God. That is why we look beyond our definitions of who is our neighbor. That is why we are people of God. God first loved us. God first showed us unconditional mercy.

"Jesus asks [the lawyer and us today] "If we know what the [Kingdom of God was like, and if you know what it means to love God with all our heart, mind, and soul], then we would not ask: "Who is my neighbor?", We would not ask, "How much is enough?" ...Jesus asks us how we read the Word and we answer with the right answers. Now, today, Jesus is asking us whether we understand [the Word and how the Kingdom of God works] and we respond with our lives." How do we read the Law? "Love your God with all your heart, with all your mind, with all our soul and love your neighbor as yourself."

Now how do we understand the law? By living out the understanding that all are welcomed and that we are called to stop and care, that we are called to be the Body of Christ here on earth, that we are called to be examples of God's grace and God's love here on earth.

Having the right answers does not mean that one knows God. One knows God because God first loved us. One knows God by being living examples of God's grace and God's love. One knows God by embracing all as one's neighbor.

Go and do likewise. Amen.