

“The Parable of the Good Samaritan”

Luke 10: 25-37

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. There is even a law that protects “Good Samaritans” if their help causes harm. The phrase “Good Samaritan” has become a huge part of our vocabulary.

So I’m sure that it is no surprise that this story is frequently preached on in churches. We have all heard dozens of sermons about the Good Samaritan and the sermons usually go something like this: The Good Samaritan sees the person in the ditch. He stops. He gives him care. So the lesson that we should all take from this story is: God wants us to do the same. We should all go out and show God’s love to all. Amen.

Now please don’t hear me saying that these sermons are bad or even wrong. In fact, it is my prayer and my hope that this lesson of faith is exactly what we incorporate into our lives. Can you imagine what the world would be like if we did just that, if we did extend care to the lost and lonely, to the hurt and hurting? This preacher would be happy because it would mean that at some point, we as

humanity had decided to be nice to one another. If we did that, if we just extended care to the hurt and hurting, I would be happy. Of course, I might be out of a job, but I would be happy.

However, the sad reality is that we haven't figure out how to do even that yet. Even after all the sermons, after all the bible Studies, after all the youth Sunday School lessons, even after having the idea of the Good Samaritan become such a big part of culture, we will be the first to admit that we haven't lived out the very basic understanding of this parable in our lives or in our world. So if this parable can really be boiled down to such a simple message of "Caring for others", I'm wondering where did we miss the point.

The reason I say this is because, after living with this text this past week, I have come to the realization that there is a lot that I have assumed and thought I knew about this text that are just not there. For example, nowhere in this text is the Samaritan called good. That name comes from the title of the parable, a title that was added some time long ago by an editor or translator. Jesus never calls the Samaritan good. I know right, mind blown. I'll wait a few minutes if you want to check it out yourself.

So I figured, while I'm admitting my assumptions about this text, I should also confess that in the past, like so many preachers and people of faith, I have let

my assumptions about this story shape the message that I believed was being shared by Luke to his readers. One such experience happened years ago when I was a Camp Counselor.

Our small group was supposed to design a worship service surrounding this parable of the Good Samaritan. We even had the youth act the parts. We told the campers the message that this text calls us to do is to love our neighbors. I even believe we played the James Taylor's song, "Shower the people you love with love."

As counselors, as ones guiding these impressionable youth's minds, we all felt good about our message and the worship service that night. We knew the campers understood that we as people of faith are supposed to show God's love to all. We as camp counselors felt like 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 ends well on that week of camp. Right?

But now, as I am processing my assumptions about this parable, I am wondering if we didn't do those campers a disservice. Here is why I say that. Essentially what we did was to give the youth permission to put boundaries on whom they were supposed to show unconditional mercy. Sure, we told the youth to

love their neighbor but then we turned around and said, shower the people you love with love. Basically, we gave them permission to define who their neighbor was and who their neighbor was not.

Looking back on that instance, I know that I'm not alone in sharing this message. Nor am I alone in hearing this message. So given all that, I want us to take another look at this story again, putting aside our assumptions and preconceived notions and really take a look at what this story is saying.

At the beginning of our text, we see that Jesus is traveling on his way to Jerusalem. On this journey, he is stopped by a lawyer who is needing a little clarification about his faith. Basically, the lawyer is asking Jesus to give him the "faith in a nutshell" speech, which usually goes like this: "In twenty words or less, tell me 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. He knows it has already been promised to him but he wants to make sure he is doing what he is supposed to do to receive this reward. This is his whole faith goal. This is why he claims to be a person of faith...the promise of Eternal life.

So Jesus responds to the lawyer's question with another question, "What does the law say?"

Now, let me just say, this is the point that we as readers know something is up. It is at this point, we are all thinking to ourselves, “Watch out Buddy”. We know, that after reading the previous verses found in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus never does or says exactly what we expect him to do or say. Jesus never gives the simple straightforward answer especially when the person asks for a straightforward answer. All through the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is constantly expanding people’s vision, expanding people’s understanding, expanding people’s experience of what exactly is the Kingdom of God.

Which means just when we as people of faith think we have got it all figured out, Jesus throws us a curveball which is exactly what happens in the new verses of this text.

Jesus knows how the lawyer is going to respond. In fact, everyone knows how the lawyer is going to respond. So it is no surprise when the lawyer respond to the question of what does the law say with the answer of “Love your God with all your heart, all your mind, and all our soul. And you should love your neighbor as well”, thinking that this would be the end of the conversation between him and Jesus, because after all, the lawyer just gave the “correct” technical answer.

However, like always, just when the person thinks they’ve got it all figured out, Jesus surprises them. The lawyer follows up his answer with the question,

“Who is my neighbor” to which Jesus responds by telling this parable, throwing all of our expectations and assumptions out the window.

At this point, we as readers realize that although we may have the correct technical answer, we have not captured the full understanding of faith. Jesus wants us to realize that faith is not just about eternal life. It is also about showing God’s love and God’s grace to all people. With just a few words, Jesus complicates our simple black and white faith with a lot of grey areas.

And he does so in such a brilliant way. He uses a method of teaching that was popular at that time. In this type of storytelling, the teacher would make his point by telling a story that involved a priest, a Levite and an Israelite. That was the pattern. The story would always end with a person the audience could relate to, someone who acts like them, talks like them, even thinks like them. The story would always end with a person the audience would of course embrace as one of their own.

This type of story was sort of like the Galilean version of a priest, a rabbi, and an atheist walk into the bar. Just like us, everyone already knows the punchline.

So when Jesus begins telling this story, 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.

Then all of a sudden: The word "Samaritan" finds its way into the story. And the crowd realizes something unexpected is going to happen. As readers, we can almost hear them saying, "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!

At this point of the story, with the introduction of the Samaritan, we can almost hear the crowd saying, "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 here is the kicker.... allow them to show us love as well?

As Jesus finishes the story, he asks which of these do you think was a neighbor to the man? Not surprising, the lawyer cannot even say the word: Samaritan. He simply says the one who showed mercy, to which Jesus responds by saying Go and do likewise.

This parable defies our assumptions. It shatters our preconceived notions. It expands our understanding of who is our neighbor. Because you see, Jesus wants the lawyer, wants the crowd, wants us to realize is that the Kingdom of God is not a discussion to be had. It is not a hypothetical statement or goal we are all trying to achieve. The Kingdom of God is an act. It is an act of compassion. It is an act of love. It is an act of mercy. The Kingdom of God is an action we live out day in and day out, not just once to make ourselves feel better, not just once to prove we are good, The Kingdom of God is an action based on our understanding and experience of God's love and God's grace in our lives that we live out every second, every moment of our days.

The Kingdom of God is not an act limited to the people who think like us, act like us, talk like us. The Kingdom of God is an act of love, an act of compassion, an act of mercy given for all. It is an experience that embraces all as

God's Beloved children. It is an understanding that shapes our way of being as people of faith.

This past week, as I took time to really look at this parable of the Good Samaritan, I cannot help but think what an appropriate story for a time such as this. I'm not talking about the unrest that seems to be filling our world right now. I'm talking about the living version of what is happening in Rio right now.

I'll admit I am an Olympic nerd. I love the sports. I love hearing about Michael Phelps and Simone Biles. I love hearing about the athletes' achievements and gold medals. But what I love more than all those things are the stories behind the athletes. You know the stories that tell us, that show us how people can come together across nations, across boundaries, across enemy lines and celebrate the human spirit and the connection we all have.

Out of this Olympics so far, one of my favorite stories has been that for the very first time ever there is a refuge team and on that team is a young woman who swam three hours to safety, pushing a boat full of people to dry land. The story goes that she left her homeland and made the journey, crossing the sea to Greece. However on this journey, her boat full of about 20 people began to take on water and sink. This young woman, her sister, and two others hopped out and began pushing the boat to shore which was still some distance away. At some point the

two others became tired and had to get back into the boat. But this young woman and her sister pushed the boat for three hours to safety. And now she is able to compete as an Olympic athlete. It is an amazing story, but I'll be honest, the cynic in me, remembers the opening ceremonies and how everyone cheered for this refugee team, celebrating their hard work of getting to this place but it also seemed like everyone had forgotten that just a few months before that moment, these same people were jeered and ignored, turned away from safety, all because they were considered "others".

To me, watching that moment, it seemed like all it took for these "others" to be accepted was a change of labels...having them go from refugee to athlete for these people to be embraced and shown a little human dignity. It is amazing to think what a change of label, even a label that calls you good, will do in changing people's perceptions.

However the sad reality is, that in just a few weeks, the games will be over and those once proud labels of athletes will once again be exchanged, exchanged for labels like refugee, African, Muslim, Israeli, and the world will once again go back to boundaries and divides, will once again go back to enemies lines and exclusions, seeming to forget the connection that we all just experienced, the connection of our human spirit.

In this parable, the lawyer asks, “Who is my neighbor, expecting an easy answer, expecting his assumptions confirmed. But, as people of faith, we know life and faith are not that easy. Maybe that is why this parable is such a favorite. Because it forces us to shift our attentions away from the idea of neighbor and calls us to act as neighbors. It shifts our attentions away from our one time good deeds to our every day living as people of faith.

Maybe this story is a favorite, told over and over again because it reminds us that we are called to be people of love, people of grace, people of mercy, not just to those who we love but to all, and for all of God’s children.

Maybe this story is a favorite because it celebrates the human connection and shows us that that should always be the goal of our faith. Through the very verses of this text, our assumptions are shattered. Our preconceived notions are redefined. And our understanding of the Kingdom of God is expanded.

Now Go and do likewise. Amen.