

The Sin of Uselessness

Micah 6:6-8; Luke 10:25-37

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It was one of the worst things you could say about another person. It was normally said with disgust or disdain. You might as well have said that he was a Communist, which back in the 1960s was about as critical a judgment as one could make. As a child, I would occasionally overhear an adult conversation about some unsavory character. He may have walked out on his family, hurt a child, or abused his wife, something that the adults in my family considered to be despicable. The crescendo description of this good-for-nothing scoundrel went something like this: “Why, he is just useless! Absolutely useless!”

And with that the conversation usually ended. The scoundrel had been soundly reprimanded and put in his place. He was deemed useless.

Uselessness has a theological dimension too. We see pictures of it throughout the New Testament. Remember the son who told his father that he would go and work in the field but did not go? How useless was that! Or what about gaining the whole world and losing one’s soul: how useless is that. And then there were the scribes and Pharisees whom Jesus described as being like whitewashed tombs. They were pretty and clean on the outside, but on the inside, where it really mattered, they were full of dead men’s bones. Useless. Think about Judas—present at the Last Supper, but in his heart he was ready to betray Jesus. Even the Apostle Paul in the book of Romans describes those who “turned aside” and became “useless.” (NAS, 3:12)

Yes, there is in the Bible the sin of uselessness, and we see a picture of it in our text from the Gospel of Luke. It is one of the best-known stories in the Bible, a favorite of many: the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus told the story in response to a question by a teacher, a trained theologian in their day. The theologian asked Jesus, who was not a trained theologian, who was a kind of lay teacher, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Jesus said essentially, “You’re the theologian. What do you read in the law?”

The theologian responded with the classic text from Judaism, their John 3:16. They call it today the *shema*: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind.” Then he added this from Leviticus: “and your neighbor as yourself.”

Jesus said, “Good answer. Go and do that and you will have the answer to your question, eternal life.”

The theologian just couldn’t leave it alone, though. Luke says that “wanting to justify himself,” he asked Jesus this follow-up question, “And who is my neighbor?”

That’s when Jesus told the Parable of the Good Samaritan. In this wonderful story, there are three sets of characters. The first set is the robbers. A man was traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho and “fell into the hands of robbers.” Of course, they didn’t have state patrol to ensure safe travel, so bands of robbers often attacked travelers. They were vicious. They beat this man, stripped him of his clothing and money, and left him for dead.

The second set of characters is religious leaders: a priest and a Levite. They were traveling the same road to Jericho, a priestly city, possibly for an official priestly function. Contact with a corpse would have made them ritually unclean and therefore unable to participate in any official function in Jericho. So instead of offering aid to the wounded man, whom they thought to be dead, they passed on the other side of the road. They were bound by the teachings of the Law, as they understood it.

The third set of characters is actually an individual, a surprising individual. Those who heard Jesus tell this story likely expected this third character to be a Jewish layman. Then the story would have been a polemic against the clergy. Aha! I knew it! They’re all just a bunch of hypocrites! But it’s not a Jewish layman. Jesus surprises them. The third character, the one who fulfills the command of the law to “love your neighbor as yourself,” is the enemy, a despised Samaritan. Animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans ran deeply. Notice that the Samaritan man, who would

have been despised by the ones listening to this story, acts with compassion and extraordinary generosity. In addition to giving immediate care to the wounded man, the Samaritan takes him to an inn and pays two denarii for his care, an amount equal to two days wages for a laborer. Then he makes arrangement to pay for any additional expenses. He knew that if the wounded man incurred debt, he could have been forced to serve as the innkeeper's slave until the debt was paid. The generosity of this good Samaritan insured the freedom of the wounded man.

And with that the story ends. Remember why Jesus told the story. He told it to answer the theologian's question, "Who is my neighbor?"

When the story ended, Jesus asked the theologian, "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" Who was a good neighbor—the priest, the Levite, or the Samaritan? Another way of asking this question might be, "Which of these three, do you think, was useful and which was useless?"

Notice that the theologian couldn't bring himself to say, "The Samaritan." He said instead, "The one who showed mercy."

Jesus said, "Go and do likewise."

Three sets of characters. The first set was thugs, thieves, who robbed, beat, and abandoned a man to die on the side of a path. The second set was religious, the clergy, whose understanding of faith in this case made them useless. These were not bad men. They weren't evil. They didn't create the problem. They just didn't do anything useful. They embraced an understanding of faith that prevented them from showing mercy that day. They were hampered by religious taboos. Had they stopped and investigated they would have found a human being in great need. But they didn't stop. They placed ritual over compassion. They placed law over person. So I ask you, which of these two sets of characters committed the greater sin? Those who beat and robbed the man or those who ignored him? Perhaps that's an unfair question. My rabbi friend says that maybe the priest and Levite knew others were coming behind them who could offer aid. Therefore, they didn't really abandon him; they just left his care to others. Now, I wouldn't want to argue with the rabbi, but that's not a part of the story.

Perhaps the appropriate question should include all three sets of characters. So I would ask it this way: which of these three characters was useful? And that's easy to answer. It was the Samaritan who showed mercy. He alone was useful.

Go and do likewise. If you want to inherit eternal life, Jesus says to go and be as useful as that Samaritan man on the road to Jericho. That is the world of the Lord on this second Sunday in Lent. Our faith drives us into the lives of wounded people on the side of our paths. There are no untouchables in Christian faith. There is no law that places ritual over people. To the contrary, usefulness is our ritual. The religions of humanity have called for endless sacrifices, countless prayers, and journeys to Mecca, Jerusalem, Rome, and other sacred places. Religious people have kissed sacred stones, bathed in sacred rivers, and climbed sacred stairs. For Jesus, the measure of faith was mercy. Did you show mercy to the people you met today who needed it? Were you useful? That, according to our Lord, is the sacred.

That's what the Hebrew prophet Micah was trying to say long before Jesus.

*With what shall I come before
the Lord,
and bow myself before God on
high?
Shall I come before him with
burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?
Will the Lord be pleased with
thousands of rams,
with ten thousands of rivers of
oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my
transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin
of my soul?
He has told you, O mortal, what
is good;
and what does the Lord require
of you*

*but to do justice, and to love
kindness,
and to walk humbly with your
God?*

In reality, our temptation is not to become robbers or good Samaritans. Our temptation is to fall somewhere between the two and be guilty of the sin of uselessness. If you want to inherit eternal life, go and be as useful as the Samaritan man on the road to Jericho.

Closing Prayer

Save us, O Lord, from the sin of uselessness so that we may contribute to the betterment of the human family by doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with you. Amen.