

What It Means to Be a Good Samaritan Today

Amos 7:7-17; Luke 10:25-37

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Here's how you want a good Samaritan story to end. This happened last month beside a New Jersey highway. A man named John Bishop was driving northbound on I-295 when he heard a woman scream. He looked and saw a man attacking a woman and dragging her towards the woods at the side of the highway. Bishop made a split-second decision to pull over and rushed to the woman's aid. The two men began fighting. The man who attacked the woman ran back toward the highway, but Bishop caught him and threw him to the ground. Three off-duty firemen saw the fight and helped Bishop subdue the man and hold him until police arrived.

As it turns out, the woman had inadvertently gotten off the bus at the wrong bus stop and was walking to her stop when she was attacked. Fortunately for her a good Samaritan intervened and prevented a possible murder.

Good Samaritan stories don't always end so well, though. This one happened in Washington state. Two intoxicated men left a restaurant. They began to harass a homeless man. They knocked over the homeless man's bike. Then they knocked over his cart, which had his small dog in it. A good Samaritan saw the altercation and rushed over to help the homeless man. The two intoxicated men then attacked the good Samaritan with a machete and a chain belt. A witness captured the horrific attack on her phone. That good Samaritan was taken to a Seattle hospital in critical condition. The two suspects were arrested and will face felony assault charges.

What does it mean to be a good Samaritan today? We all hope that if we ever come to the aid to someone in distress it will turn out like the first story and not like the second one. But we can never know today, can we? While we must be especially cautious today, we can still be a good Samaritan. However, there is more to this story than

bandaging the wounds of a stranger in distress, something subtle, something very challenging. And it just may be the hope of the world.

First of all, let me remind you of the setting of this parable. A lawyer stood, Luke says, and tested Jesus with a question. A lawyer back then was not quite like our lawyers today. This lawyer was an expert in the Law of Moses. Here's his question to Jesus: "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Important question, right? Jesus reminded him that he was the lawyer, the expert in the Law of Moses, and that he ought to know the answer to that question. The lawyer answered correctly. What must I do to inherit eternal life? You shall love God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind, he said. Then he added this: and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

Jesus told him that he answered correctly and that he should live his life that way. End of conversation, right?

Not yet. Luke says that the lawyer then asked a follow up question. It was a trick question, Luke says, asked to justify himself. Granted there is a danger in reading into the text someone's attitude because we don't really know their attitude unless the text tells us. But I can't help but think this question was asked with a sneer: And just who, pray tell, is my neighbor?

Two important questions. What must I do to inherit eternal life? And who is my neighbor?

So Jesus told this story. A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. Notice in the New Testament when someone leaves Jerusalem, regardless of the direction he's traveling, he always goes down. Jerusalem was thought to be the high point of their world. This unfortunate traveler fell into the hands of robbers, Jesus said, who beat the poor fellow and left him half dead on the side of the road.

A priest came along, a highly respected religious leader. He saw the wounded man, moved to the other side of the road, and passed by.

Let me say this in memory of my late friend Rabbi Jeffrey Ballon. We were discussing this parable one day and Jeffrey said, "In defense of

the priest, maybe he knew someone else was coming behind him, and that person could help the wounded man.” Perhaps, but the text doesn’t say that.

Next, a Levite came by, Jesus said. He was a descendant from the Tribe of Levi and, like the priest, was an important religious official. Jesus said he too saw the wounded man, moved to the other side of the road, and passed by.

The next passerby surely shocked the lawyer. A Samaritan. For the lawyer, there was no such thing as a *good* Samaritan. They were all dogs, the undesirables. They came from modern day Iraq and were only part Jewish. They practiced their own quasi-Jewish religion and believed it was superior to Judaism. Jews hated Samaritans, and Samaritans hated Jews.

Let me pause for a moment here. We don’t have Samaritan any more. This parable loses its impact if we don’t identify a comparable cultural enemy. Who would it be for you? Undocumented immigrants perhaps. Muslims. People in the gay community. Maybe it is rednecks for you. Or the poor or ultra wealthy. Maybe it’s Trump supporters or Ocasio-Cortez supporters. For this parable to have meaning for us, we must hear it in terms that relate to us. Ask yourself, “Who are the dogs, the undesirables, today?”

A Samaritan came by, Jesus said. He too saw the wounded man. Unlike the priest and Levite, the Samaritan was moved with pity. He poured oil and wine on the man’s wounds and then bandaged them. In an act of extreme compassion, he then put the man on his own donkey and took him to an inn for care. He paid the innkeeper and told him that if he incurred any additional expense he would pay that too when he returned.

If I ever fall into the hands of robbers and am left half dead on the side of the road, I hope this man walks by.

When Jesus finished the story, he asked the lawyer this question: “Which of the three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?”

Notice the lawyer didn't say the Samaritan. He couldn't bring himself to say it aloud, so he said instead, "The one who showed him mercy."

"Go and do likewise," Jesus told him.

Two important questions hang in the balance here. What must I do to inherit eternal life? And who is my neighbor? They are two of the most important questions in life, aren't they? We really want to get these two right.

This parable is about tending to the wounds of a stranger in need, yes, but it doesn't stop there. It has a subtle message that is uncomfortable and difficult. Only one character in this story teaches us the way of Jesus Christ. Not the priest. Not the Levite. The Samaritan is the instructor in this parable. He's the one who models the way of Christ. This parable suggests that we must be willing to learn from our cultural enemies, our Samaritans. We must be willing to hear them, listen to their stories. That is difficult because it humanizes them. When we listen to their stories, we realize that they are people, just like us. Then we cannot stereotype them anymore. When we accept that they are just people, we cannot demonize them anymore. This parable, I tell you, is more radical than we want it to be. It asks us to do the unthinkable: heal and be healed by our enemies.

Once we are grasped by this radical message of Jesus, we will no longer be able to label and then dismiss our enemies. We will be required to do the very difficult work of listening to them, understanding them. And maybe that really is the hope of the world. That's what it means to be a good Samaritan today.

Closing Prayer

Lord, your ways are not our ways. Our ways are so much more petty and vindictive. Save us and help us to live into your ways. Amen.