

The Ever-Widening Circle

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Luke 10:25-37

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "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; and your neighbor as yourself." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

This morning's text, as you know, is the story of the Good Samaritan, one of the best-known and best-loved stories in the whole Bible. Jesus, in answer to the question posed by an expert in the law "Who is my neighbor?" responds with a story about a man who was traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho when he was beaten, stripped, robbed and left half dead. As he lay there helpless, he was passed by a priest and later a Levite, both of whom who ignored his plight. However, eventually a Samaritan happened upon him, cleaned and bandaged his wounds, put him on his own animal, bought him a place to stay and promised to pay for any expenses that came from caring for him. Jesus tells this story to teach what it means to be a good neighbor, while also using the example of how we religious people sometimes forget what it means to be living witnesses to what we believe.

In order to understand the meaning of this text, we must understand a bit about the cast of characters in it. The priest and the Levite were, indeed, church workers. They were religious people who were well-schooled in the law. The priest represented the highest religious leadership for the Jews and the Levites were their designated lay associates. Priests and Levites would have

been responsible for activities that took place in the Temple in Jerusalem, although they were not required to actually live in Jerusalem.

The Priest and the Levite would have been returning to Jerusalem from Jericho in order to lead religious ceremonies in the Temple and touching a man who was as injured as the victim in this story would have defiled them, rendering them unable to perform their religious duties without returning home and undergoing a ritual cleansing. It was their duty to be in that Temple and the Law made it difficult for them to help this man. They placed their practice of piety over the necessity of helping a man in his greatest hour of need.

By contrast, the Samaritan was an outsider in Jewish circles. They were considered unclean heretics from whom nothing good could come and yet here Jesus shocks his listeners in a way that perhaps we cannot be shocked by this text because we do not regard the Samaritans in the same way as Jesus' contemporaries. In Jesus' telling of this story, the one who is good, the one who is a neighbor, is the Samaritan, the outcast, the reject, the heretic, and with whom one would not associate.

Jesus was speaking to a largely Jewish audience and the Jews and the Samaritans had a long history of theological disagreement. The Jews regarded the Samaritans as a people foreign to themselves. The Samaritans were not allowed in the Jerusalem Temple. The Jews and Samaritans differed on issues of ritual cleanliness and they disagreed on whether or not God should be worshipped in Jerusalem, as the Jews thought or on Mount Gerizim, as the Samaritans thought. However, they both observed the same Torah, they both understood themselves as being the true disciples of the true same God, yet they disagreed on what constituted Holy Scripture. They saw themselves both as practicing the faith of Moses, yet they traced their heritage to different tribes. They argued over how the Law was translated. Jews would not eat or drink out of the same cups and bowls that the Samaritans used. The Samaritans felt that the Jews were "revisers and modernizers" of the faith and therefore rejected most of the books of the Hebrew Scriptures. They disagreed about how the Sabbath was to be honored.¹

For the lawyer in Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan to have to admit that the Samaritan, and not the priest or the Levite was the one who was the neighbor to the injured man was hard to admit. These two religious groups wanted nothing to do with each other and when Jesus first told this parable, it was painfully difficult to admit that a Samaritan could be good. The title "Good Samaritan" would have been a contradiction in terms.

I think sometimes we are too hard on the priest and the Levite. These men were practicing their faith as they were taught. They were striving to be good people, good followers of God, and obedient servants of God's will. They were living the faith as they were raised to live the faith. They were trying to do the right thing.

However, Jesus teaches us in this story that there is often a disconnect between our faithfulness to God and our relationship with our neighbor. It is possible for us to see our

¹ Information from *The Harper's Bible Dictionary* and *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*.

relationship with God as so personal, so individualized, that it is only a relationship between God and me and not a relationship with anyone else. In our evangelical tradition, we have placed a great emphasis on a “personal” relationship with Jesus Christ and that is indeed important. However, that relationship presupposes that a personal relationship with Jesus Christ will also lead us into a Christ-like relationship with other persons.

The question Jesus addresses in this morning’s text is the question “Who is my neighbor.” For his listeners, their neighbors were those who looked like them and talked like them and worshiped like them and believed like them and Jesus’ response to this was a resounding NO! For Jesus, the neighbor is the one in need. Our neighbor is the one who needs love and healing and compassion and care. Our neighbor is the one who needs what we have to offer. Our neighbors may look and think and live differently from us yet they are our neighbors nonetheless. Like family members, our neighbors are not simply the ones who are easy to love. For thousands of years, religious beliefs have been used with great indignation as an excuse to propagate the human division that sin creates.

The practice of religion has been used to divide the world into categories of “us” and “them” and yet Jesus teaches us that when our religious practices cause us to ignore human need, to accept human suffering, to fail to love our neighbor as we love ourselves, then our religious practices are wrong. It was into this broken and divided humanity that Christ was born, it was into this separated and segregated society that Jesus preached his message of compassion for the other, and it was for this fragmented and disjointed that he gave his life and bids us to do the same.

The life and ministry of Jesus can be understood as an ever-widening circle. Just when you think you know who is out and who is in, just when you think you know where the boundaries are drawn, Jesus says or does something that messes it all up. Who first hears of Jesus’ birth? Those unclean outcasts known as shepherds. Who is first to bring him gifts and pay him homage? Those outsiders from Persia known as the Magi. Then Jesus calls the twelve, including Peter, who refers to himself as “a sinful man,” and Matthew who was a tax collector.

At this point, the disciples feel pretty good about their little “club.” They really know who is out and who is in. When a blind man named Bartimaeus cries out for Jesus, they tell him Jesus is too busy, which is when Jesus stops and ministers to him. Jesus heals the sick, raises the dead, and frees the demon possessed, and in doing so, moves the line even further out. Yet, he is not done. Before you know it, women are included, their witness is celebrated, and children are lifted up as models of Kingdom faithfulness.

Now you know that Jesus must be done. Here is the line, and no one can cross it. Jesus’ ministry is for Israel and Israel alone. Right? However, when Israel’s faith is weak, Jesus lifts up the witness of the Gentiles, healing the servant of a Roman centurion. This is bad. This is very bad. I mean, it cannot possibly get worse right? It is not like he is going to let in the Samaritans, right?

And if even the Samaritans are included, everyone must be, and if everyone is included, is this not both the source of our hope, and our model for living as the people of God?

When we gather, who is missing? Where do we understand the boundaries to be? Who drew those boundaries, God or us? Who is standing, looking at that boundary, waiting to be invited to step over it, and what is it that keeps us too busy to ask?

Gloria In Excelsis Deo.