

Luke 10:25-42
Neighbor-Love
February 21, 2021
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Scripture

²⁵ Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ²⁶ He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” ²⁷ 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.” ²⁸ And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

²⁹ But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” ³⁰ 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. ³¹ Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³² So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. ³⁴ 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. ³⁵ 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.’ ³⁶ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” ³⁷ He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.” (NRSV)

Sermon

This parable is fitting as we begin Lent, a season we tend to frame in terms of a journey. It is a travel story set within a travel story, about what happens to a traveler on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. The author of Luke positions the story amid Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem, a journey that will end in his death. With that in mind, I would suggest that we think of this story as kind of a “scriptural GPS [for our journey], routing us in the only direction God desires----the way of love and compassion toward others.”¹

¹ James E. Wallace, *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 3*, David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors, (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2010), 243.

The truth is, we all need a little help navigating our daily travels and scripture is a good place to start. I will admit, though, there are times I spend more time with my planner than I do with the Bible. I wonder if that is true for some of you. I've noticed paper planners aren't as popular as they once were. There was a time when everyone who walked into a meeting had a planner in their hand (of course there was a time when we actually walked into meetings, rather than Zooming in). But this is the digital age and many people have switched, to a digital calendar or planner. It may not surprise you to learn that I use both. I keep my appointments on Google calendar and in a paper planner. I would give up the Google calendar in a heartbeat (although it is nice to always have it as close as my phone), but the paper one, I would never give it up. To be fair, I tried once and it went badly.

One of the things I love about my paper planner is there are several lists at the right side of each page. One list is a church to-do list, one is a home to-do list. There's a list for things I'm waiting on other people to do so I can do my part. And a "next week" list where I list the things I need to carry over into the following week. Oh, how I love a good list. The thing I love the most about lists is crossing things off them. It is incredibly satisfying.

I know I am not alone in this. If we were worshipping in person, I would ask you to raise your hand if you enjoy a good list and I know some of you well enough to know, you would happily raise your hands. Lists make life manageable. A list allows me to see in black and white what is expected. People who make lists know if a, b, and c must be done before we go home, then by golly, a, b, and c will be done.

I can't help but imagine the lawyer in today's story was a list person. He wanted to tick off all the boxes. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" he asked.

But the thing is, he was a man of the law. In this context, "lawyer" is a scribe, an interpreter of Jewish law. He knew what was on the list. When Jesus asked him what he thought he had to do, 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." "...Do this and you shall live," Jesus responded. It was the lawyer's follow-up question, "And who is my neighbor?" that was the impetus the parable before us today, probably the most familiar of all the parables attributed to Jesus.

Jewish New Testament scholar, Amy-Jill Levine, one of the authors of the children's book I read this morning, has done a lot of work on this parable. Her work can help us better understand how the Gospel's original audience would have heard this story and, hopefully, will help us connect this story to our own stories and our own journeys.

A man, presumably a Jewish man, was robbed and beaten and left for dead. Luke's audience would have felt nothing but compassion for the victim of this crime. Along the road, separately, came a priest and a Levite, basically Jewish clergy. Both passed by the injured man. Why? Scholars, and many preachers, me included, have tried to give the passers-by an out, an excuse. They didn't stop because of purity regulations, if they helped the man, it would make them unclean. It's a good idea, but wrong. You will recall a few weeks ago when I preached on sabbath law, I reminded us that according to Jewish tradition, life is the priority. Saving someone's life always takes precedence. According to Levine, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., gave the most plausible explanation for the priest and the Levite's failure to help, they were afraid.

What if the person who hurt and robbed this man is still around? They ask themselves, "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me." The Samaritan, who does stop to help, asks the better question, "If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?" The Samaritan was focused on the other person, the priest and Levite, on themselves. Since the Jewish community was made of 3 groups, priests, Levites, and Israelites, when Jesus told this story, his audience would have expected the third person coming along would naturally be an Israelite. You can imagine their surprise (maybe horror is a better word) when Jesus said, "...a Samaritan, while traveling, came near him." A Samaritan?

Samaritans and Jews were not friends...they were blue and yellow. There was longstanding animosity between them. They each claimed to worship the God of the ancient Hebrews, but each group had its own scriptures, temple, and religious practices. Luke emphasized this strained relationship in chapter 9 in the text we used for Ash Wednesday, "On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; ⁵³ but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem," toward the focal point of the Jewish religious world. Under

normal circumstances, the wounded man and the Samaritan would have avoided having anything to do with each other.

In her book, *The Misunderstood Jew*, Levine trying to help her readers grasp this relationship between the Samaritans and Jews, writes, “We should think of ourselves as the person in the ditch and then ask, ‘Is there anyone, from any group, about whom we’d rather die than acknowledge, ‘She offered help,’ or ‘He showed compassion.’ More, is there any group whose members might rather die than help us? If so, then we know how to find the modern equivalent for the Samaritan.”²

So, if you were in the ditch, who would you hope did not stop to help? Who do you think would definitely not stop to help, given the chance? This parable tells us a person like that saves the injured man’s life. The answers to those questions change for us doesn’t it, based on who we perceive as our enemy in the moment? There was a time, perhaps after 9-11, when some of us might have responded “Muslims.” Sadly, there are probably still people who would answer that way.

If we are honest, we would admit it makes us uncomfortable to dwell very long on this question, doesn’t it? We don’t want to admit, certainly not out loud, that there are people we would love for Jesus (or our pastor) to tell us, “Oh, that group doesn’t count as your neighbor...you don’t have to love them.”

On Ash Wednesday, I told you the journey through Lent, through these familiar stories on the way to Jerusalem, might make you uncomfortable. Well, here it is...the moral of this story isn’t, “If you see someone who needs help, help them.” I don’t think Jesus would have wasted his time on that elementary idea at this point in his ministry. His followers already knew that. We know that too. What his followers needed to know, what we need to know is there is nobody who is not our neighbor. Nobody. There is no “free pass.” There is no excuse to pass on the other side.

I tried to think of an example, from someone else’s life, of how this works. But I decided, since I am asking you to be uncomfortable in this Lenten season, I should demonstrate my willingness to be uncomfortable along with you. So, let me tell you who comes to mind for me when I think about the ones I would least want to

² Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2006), 148-49.

stop to help me, the ones I imagine would just as soon pass by on the other side rather than saving a progressive, female minister. Christians. The Christians who “hate the sin and love the sinner,” who demonize people I love in the LGBTQ+ community, who refuse to bless families formed by the love of same sex partners, who refuse to acknowledge there is suffering they know nothing about, like the suffering of a woman who is pregnant and doesn’t want to be, the suffering of people who choose to live outside in the cold rather than living in a shelter that confiscates phones and requires chapel attendance, the suffering of the ones whose addictions keep them from making decisions that honor themselves and others. In my heart, they feel like the enemy. I would rather be dependent on anyone else for mercy. Literally anyone.

Please don’t misunderstand my confession. Even if you agree with me (and it’s okay if you don’t), I don’t get a pass and neither do you. The Christians who interpret scripture and the ways of God differently than me or you, are still our neighbors. There is no loophole. Love your neighbor means love everyone, all the time. Really love them, want the best for them and be willing to put actions behind those words.

This parable, in this part of my journey, is challenging me to figure out how to do that, through my anger, through my frustration, through my deep sadness at all the ways I have seen how their beliefs hurt people. It is challenging me to think about how to love those neighbors and how to keep the ones who have been hurt by them safe, because I think it’s my job to make sure the space this church creates is safe, for the ones who are here and the ones who will be in the future. Loving our neighbors has to include not allowing our neighbors to hurt other neighbors on our watch. Hurting people isn’t good for the victim and it is not good for the one doing the hurting either.

And maybe while I’m reflecting on all of that this week, I will turn the mirror on myself and think about how I get it wrong too. What do I believe that hurts other people, that keeps me from loving my neighbor...all the neighbors? All of this is uncomfortable. But it’s work we have to do in order to become who we were created to be. I think it’s worth the discomfort. Our faith is not about checking off boxes and crossing things off of a list. Our faith is about a way of living that aligns with God. And God’s way is a way of love and compassion. For everyone.

One of the things I love about Jesus' parables is they leave us to wonder what happened next. This parable of the Samaritan gives us space to imagine how this encounter changed the Samaritan and the injured man. It asks us to think about how the actions of the Samaritan might have changed both the Jewish man's and the Samaritan's families...forever.

I choose to imagine a scene like the end of the story I read to the children today. I couldn't help noticing that the scene took place around a meal, where the blues and the yellows were gathered, tasting each other's favorite foods and practicing what it means to be neighbors, what it means to be in communion with one another. I know we are a long way from that in this world. But I hold it out to you as a vision for what God intends for all of us. Can you see it? I promise you, the work starts right here. Amen.