

Meg Lindsay

Sermon: Luke 10:25-37: The Good Samaritan

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 neighbour 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 neighbour?' 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 travelling 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 neighbour 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.'

"Go and Do Likewise"

This scripture passage is probably one of the most familiar passages in the Bible. Ask even those who have never been to church if they've heard of the parable of the Good Samaritan, and most will say yes, but how well do we really know it? It is a profound passage that we often gloss over as the moral obligations of a Christian and a human being. It seems to me that each of us can be found in this passage as all the characters, so let's revisit it today.

The story is prompted by a question from a lawyer, a Biblical scholar. His concern is eternal life, but Jesus turns it around and asks him to answer his own question by pointing to scripture. This lawyer knows scripture, reciting the shema from Deuteronomy, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength and with all your mind." This is something that even if he weren't a

Biblical Scholar, he would know, because faithful Jewish people recite the shema every day, have it written on their homes or held in a mezuzah, a small box with a tiny scroll with the text nailed onto their doorway. He also acknowledges the other important lesson of the scriptures, "Love your neighbor as yourself." This comes from the Leviticus 19 passage we read today, but the problem with it is it's very ambiguous to what a neighbor really is. This has been a question for the Jews for a long time, especially when they were in exile. Does the neighbor include enemies? Is it only your family? Does it include foreigners or is it only the Israeli people? So the Lawyer, with all these questions in his mind, asks Jesus, possibly to trick him, possibly because he really wanted a good answer, "who is my neighbor?" Thus beginning the famous story:

It begins with a certain man, given no physical, religious or national descriptions, but assumed by the lawyer and those listening to be a Jewish man. He's leaving Jerusalem and going to Jericho, which is a notoriously dangerous path. I myself went on this road, when I was in Israel and Palestine two months ago,. We started in Jericho by the dead sea, which is considered the lowest city in the world, 820 feet below sea level. In Jericho it was 118 degrees, which despite the dry heat, was still the hottest I'd ever been, though this week was cutting it close! One of our group members passed out from heat exhaustion, and we decided to skip our excursion to float on the Dead Sea to instead drive to the city of Jerusalem. The drive went from 820 feet below sea level to 2,500 feet above sea level. On the road, I could see how it was dangerous, whether it was the desert near Jericho or the rocky cliffs near Jerusalem, there were plenty of hiding places for robbers. Bedouin Tents lined the road and the edges of cliffs, suburbs of Jerusalem began to appear on the top of the cliffs, only a 30 minute drive,

showed a drastic change in climate. When we stepped out on the Mount of Olives, looking over the city of Jerusalem, the temperature was 75 degrees, over 40 degrees different than Jericho. Riding in a bus on paved highway, it's hard to imagine walking from the temperate city of Jerusalem to the blazing hot Jericho, through the cliffs and rocks and unpaved road risking the robbers and dangers of the travel.

The man in the story suffered that fate, getting stripped and beaten and left half dead. This is the kind of suffering that we fear while walking around late at night, or watch on Law and Order, but rarely happens. This happened on a busy but dangerous road, so we then meet three more characters. The first two, a priest and a Levite, are about the same occupation. The Levite is of the tribe of priests, and along with the priest, probably just left the Temple. This was a common path for those who were coming and going from the temple of Jerusalem to the large city of Jericho. Both of these men see the man, see him in pain, and pass on the other side of the road. Now many people try to make excuses for the priest and Levite, saying that as part of their job they need to remain clean. Jewish law states that when touching a dead person, you become unclean, which means you need to be purified and take time before returning to the Temple and making sacrifices. Many say that these two thought the man was dead, and didn't want to risk it. Jesus doesn't mention this in the story though, he simply says they saw him and passed him on the other side. The other problem with this theory, is they were leaving the temple, returning presumably to their home. If they were going towards the temple, they would definitely not want to be unclean, but there's no real excuse for their action going away from the temple. On the other hand, many want to condemn these men, saying they have no heart and are too concerned with

their status, but really, how different are they than we are most days? How often do we pass by a troubled person on the side of the road with a flat tire without helping because we're late for dinner, late for work, late for anything where we don't want to get dirty? How often do we skip out on a service day because we'd rather sleep in, rather go to the beach, rather do anything than get hot and sweaty for somebody other than ourselves? It seems to be easier to just ignore it's happening, pass on the other side than interfere with our busy lives. And that is mostly the case for anybody, even those who are in the same busy seminary situation as me. In 1973, Darley and Baston did an experiment based on the parable of the Good Samaritan at Princeton Seminary in New Jersey¹. He told a group of future pastors that they either had to give a sermon on the Good Samaritan or instructions to new students about the seminary. He told half of them that they had to hurry and half that they had plenty of time to get to the location. In the path between the sites, an actor was placed who was obviously in pain, hunched over and groaned as the students passed by. When they were in a rush, only about 10% stopped to help, while when they were taking their time about 63% helped. It did not matter whether they were preaching about the Good Samaritan or not, even with the parable in their mind, they still ignored the hurt man if they were in a hurry. This was not a case of worrying about the laws of the Hebrew Bible and becoming unclean, but people who were too much in a hurry and set on doing something for their own gain.

Now imagine you are listening to this parable for the first time, Jesus is speaking to you, he mentions the first two priests passing by, and you of course expect someone to stop and help. What if he said next, "a terrorist was passing by and seeing him had

¹ http://faculty.babson.edu/krollag/org_site/soc_psych/darley_samarit.html

compassion,” or “a drug dealer was passing by and seeing him had compassion.” That is what it would have sounded like to the people hearing this story for the first time. We are so accustomed to the parable of the Good Samaritan, that we forget the scandal this would have raised among the Jews. There are laws named after this phrase, where people are required to help someone in need by at least calling the police. Many of you are probably familiar with the last episode of Seinfeld, where the crew got arrested for laughing at a fat man getting mugged because of the Good Samaritan Law in Massachusetts. Several of the characters prevalent in the series testified to how cruel the group of friends had been to them, convicting them of not being good samaritans. This law actually exists in most European countries, Canada, and several states. Another thing that comes to mind when we think of the Samaritan is Samaritan’s Purse. The organization started by Franklin Graham, Billy Graham’s son, that serves our neighbors all over the world. You may be most familiar with the Operation Christmas Child the church participates in before Christmas. It takes money donated by those giving to charity to help those in need. Now, Samaritan has become so synonymous with the word Good that we forget that it would have been considered the opposite by most Jews hearing this story in the first century. Samaritans were despised by the Jews. While Jewish people centered their faith Jerusalem, Samaritans rejected this and focused on Mount Gerizim. The hostility between the groups had existed since the conclusion of the exile, and was still present in Jesus’ day. This disagreement held much of the same characteristics that the Israeli/Palestinian conflict holds now in the same region.

Now this Samaritan holds an example that goes above and beyond most people's call, feeling compassion, the Greek word ἐσπλαγχνίσθη (Esplanxnisthe), means being moved to the depths of his bowels with compassion, the Samaritan's entire body feels for the man as much as a person can possibly feel. He takes the time to clean and anoint him, put him on his OWN animal and take him to an inn, using two days worth of pay to care for him, saying he'll be back to care even more. Wow, this act of mercy seems almost unequivocal in our day to day lives let alone from a despised outsider. When Jesus asks the lawyer who was the neighbor, the lawyer said, "the one who showed him mercy." He couldn't even call him a Samaritan, because that was too hard to comprehend, but he recognized the mercy from the man. This wasn't just an act of charity, it was an act of mercy, Mercy brings together generosity, grace, and love, it is not simply forgiving or giving to a person to whom you have no obligation or feel morally superior.

This one who shows mercy is the neighbor to the certain man, the one who shows mercy is also neighbor to the lawyer, a despised person, a Samaritan, is Jesus' example of a neighbor, of one who shows mercy. This man shows mercy so extreme, that it can only be an example of the mercy shown by God in the ministry of Jesus. Jesus took the broken, the wounded until nearly dead, and cleansed them, anointed them, carried them and cared for them. He takes us, cleanses us anoints us, carries us and cares for us.

But this story gets more complicated, while the lawyer points out the Samaritan as a neighbor, Jesus says, "go and do likewise." Jesus not only wants us to stop worrying about who our neighbor is, he wants us to become and embody the neighbor,

to actively live out the example of the despised alien. To “go and do likewise” means to slow down, to recognize people in need, to show mercy to those we wouldn’t normally love, those outside our family, our church, our neighborhood. Brendan Byrne, an Australian Jesuit theologian sums it up in a beautiful and profound way, he says, “In the ministry of Jesus, which the Church has to continue, God offers extravagant, life-giving hospitality to wounded and half-dead humanity. The way to eternal life is to allow oneself to become an active instrument and channel of that same boundary-breaking hospitality.²” So basically, The lawyer’s concern about eternal life and his neighbor was getting it all wrong, Jesus’ message was to recognize God’s hospitality in the least likely of places, and to continue that duty, and rather than worry about who your neighbor is, see everybody as a neighbor.

Jesus’ message for the lawyer is the same as for you, So “go and do likewise,” Go and slow down, take your time to get places rather than rush, Go and see your neighbors in pain, Go and be filled to your bowels with compassion for the suffering, Go and anoint and care for those in need, but most importantly, Go and recognize God’s boundary breaking hospitality, Go and become an active instrument in God’s life-giving mercy!

² Byrne, Brendan. *The Hospitality of God: a Reading of Luke's Gospel*. Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 2000. 100. Print.