

“The Parable of the Bad Good Samaritan”

Romans 12: 13-18 Luke 10: 23-37

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The House of Hope Presbyterian Church

August 11, 2019

Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Our passage this morning begins with Jesus telling his disciples they were blessed for what they had seen in living out the gospel. The story moves into a Lawyer giving Jesus a quiz. Jesus gives a counter question, which forces the lawyer to quote scripture. But when Jesus answers, the Lawyer counters with the question: Who is my neighbor?

Jesus tells a story: a man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho.

People who hear Jesus know that this area looks a bit like the badlands of South Dakota.

Steep terrain, washed out, dried up creek beds, plenty of places for robbers to hide.

Which they do, then leap out and attack this lone traveler.

They strip him naked and leave him half dead in the hot sun.

The story has two missed opportunities. The third person takes the opportunity, and shows compassion. The moral of the story is: have compassion. So when you see someone on the side of the road, stop and help them.

A simple, straightforward message. OK, that pretty much wraps up this sermon.

Oh, wait. This is a parable. A parable wrapped in a conflict story. About a lawyer who is trying feel good about himself. Practice a little self-justification. To prove what a wonderful guy he is, and how God must love him, with him doing the minimum amount of love required.

Like the friend who one day came upon Mark Twain, reading the Bible.

The friend asked, “Looking for inspiration?”

Twain replied, “Looking for loopholes.”

The lawyer is looking for loopholes. Who is my neighbor?

Bernard Brandon Scott in his marvelous book on parables says that all cultures draw boundaries. Insiders and outsiders. People want to defend their turf. Build iron curtains. Draw the line. That is a universal phenomenon. You set up a dualism: us vs. them.

Except in this story, Jesus sets up a triad. There are not 2 characters coming down the road. There are 3. What is a triad?

A Priest, a Minister and a Rabbi are playing a game of high stakes poker.

It's illegal. The police break in. They ask the Priest, were you gambling?

He crosses himself and lies: No.

They ask the minister, were you gambling?

He says a silent prayer, and lies: No.

They ask the Rabbi: were you gambling?

He looks at the priest, looks at the minister,
looks at the officer and says, "With who?"

That's a triad. We all know the set up. 3 characters that fit together. Jesus uses a triad: Three people come down the road.

The first one is a cultural hero. Rally round the flag person. Captain America. This is the one who holds their identity together. The hero see's someone in the ditch, and just walks on by.

The second one is also a cultural hero. Secondary hero. Like Captain America's assistant, Pepper Potts. Not as flashy as Captain America, but just as important. One of the good people. A real servant leader. The servant leader sees the body on the side of the road, and also walks on by.

What do we expect next? For Jesus story, we would expect just an ordinary Israelite. A person of good faith. One of the people on the right side of history. That's what we expect in this story. Jesus' story should have read: A Priest, a Levite and a layperson.

Only that is not what it says. It's not the usual suspects. It's a Priest, a Levite and a Samaritan. Which is to say, a priest, a minister, and their national enemy. To hear the impact of the story, you only have to ask yourself: who do you think of when you think of national enemy? The danger?

You fill in the blank. That's what Samaritan means. The enemy passes by, and the hearers expect him to do more of what the bandits did, only worse.

Only that is what not happens. The enemy stops, gets out his traveling medical kit, stops the bleeding, washes the wounds, puts the anonymous victim in the car, gets blood and dirt and filth all over the seats, drives him to a Holiday Inn, puts him in bed, stays up with him all night, tending his bandages, puts a cold wash cloth on his forehead, buys him the magical elixir of healing handed down by our fathers, 7-up. At the bedside of the sick – a compassionate a form of love. The enemy is the one who showed compassion.

When we hear that story, the sense of neighbor shifts. All cultures set up boundaries. Barriers. Insiders and outsiders. With a story, Jesus dissolves the barriers. Breaks down the divisions. In Christ, there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. No bad Samaritans, and good insiders. In Christ, we are all one.

Now in this story, everybody is identified: the Priest, the Levite, the Samaritan, the innkeeper, the bandits.

The only person who is not identified is the one in the ditch. Who was the one in the ditch?

The person in the ditch... is you.

When you are lying half-dead in the ditch, how much do those boundaries matter?

Do you only want to be saved by someone of your own religion?

Do you only want to be saved by someone of your own race?

Do you only want to be saved by someone of your own political party?

I'd like to share a story that national news carried a couple years ago. The place was Weatherford Texas. There were 8 inmates waiting to appear in court. They were in the staging cell. They are being guarded by a single guard.

The prisoners are the likes of Nick. Nick is a meth addict. He's been in prison 4 times for all those crimes that go along with being a habitual Meth addict. Now He's facing a 5th sentence. The prisoners are in the cell. The guard is sitting across the room from them with his gun and keys. The prisoners watch. The guard nods off. Then he slumps down. The prisoners realize, something is wrong. They shout and holler. Nobody comes to the door.

The prisoners realize it will be 15 minutes before anybody comes around. By that time, this guard may be beyond help. Knowing they are taking a huge risk, they break out of the holding cell. They bang on the outer walls and doors, until deputies come running. The first deputy in the door can't figure out what is going on. He thought they broke out and jumped the guard. He draws his gun and herds them back into the cell. Then the prisoners point at the guard slumped over and tell them what happened.

Someone starts CPR. Then the paramedics come and shock his heart. The guard comes back to life. The lead convict who led the prisoners breaking out, was a meth addict who had been in prison 4 times. He probably saved the guard's life.

I ask you, who ended up guarding whom? That's irony. Who is the hero? When you see the meth addict, are you willing to say, "Thank you for your service."

Who is the neighbor? Jesus is shrewd. He knows we have enemies. That we nurture all sorts of assumptions about the inhumanity of our enemies. And what our enemy will do to us. We develop preconceived ideas. We build a long list of preconceived ideas about people and turn them into enemies. We fear them. We fight them. We build up barriers against them: social barriers and physical barriers.

Did you see that picture last week, of that immigrant father and his young daughter, trying to reach safety, lying face down in the water? That photo haunts me. It is an image that, in light of this parable, makes us take a hard look at ourselves: Did we just turn our heads and walk on by?

Jesus comes along, and, with a story, demolishes our mental barriers so we can demolish our social and physical barriers.

The question is: who is my neighbor. Jesus flips it: Who showed compassion? Could it be that one day, your enemy may be the neighbor who will save you?

We start out thinking this parable is trite. Then we realize this parable is shocking. It shocks and disrupts the way we think about the world.

In the end, this story is God giving us a gift: Sight. Did you notice how many times they talked about “seeing” in this passage? 10 times. It is a story about Jesus curing our blindness and helping us to see the world differently.

The world is different than we thought. God gives us a chance to re-order a world of enemies into a world of neighbors. The possibilities for neighbor love abound.

In the parable, the half-dead man by the side of the road is restored to life. That’s the definition of Compassion: restoring someone to life. The world is filled with endless possibilities for us to share God’s gift of life.

The story starts with the lawyer wanting to know about eternal life. Jesus answers: You want to experience eternity? Then start showing boundless compassion...now.

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Sources:

Bernard Brandon Scott. *Hear Then the Parable*. Fortress Press.

David Buttrick. *Speaking Parables*. Westminster/John Knox Press.

John Dominic Crossan. *The Power of Parable*. HarperOne Press.