

Read lesson: Luke 10:25-37

Let us pray: O Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our rock and our risen redeemer. Amen.

"What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Luke 10:25 (NRSV)

If you walk down the street of any major American city, I will bet you that, if you are a practicing Christian, you will think about the Good Samaritan story. After all, it is not possible to walk down that street these days, without encountering human need in all of its different expressions: the Streetwise salesman on the corner, with his rich, rumbling bass voice, rapping his sales pitch; the amputee sitting on the sidewalk with his hand lettered sign and tin cup; the children selling M&Ms to support their basketball or baseball team, depending on the time of year; the dignified Asian American gentleman seated on a folding chair playing J. S. Bach's Double Violin Concerto with his granddaughter, who is standing beside him; the homeless woman, lost in some world that exists only in her head, thoroughly focused on the task of rummaging through the trash basket in search of breakfast.

To negotiate that on a daily basis requires a set of urban skills: finesse, discipline, and focus, not to mention physical dexterity. You can't, after all, respond to every need. Besides, who knows which of those needs is authentic?

Is there really a basketball team somewhere that benefits from the daily sale of M&Ms? And besides, I support my church, and I support Elena's House and the Ronald McDonald House and a shelter for the homeless, and I pay my taxes. And besides, I've got stuff to do and can't afford to stop and deal with every person who needs my help or I'd never get anything done.

So I do what you do. I do what we all do. I pass by on the other side, which is why this 2000-year-old story is one of the best, maybe *the* best story anyone ever told, and it is why I think about it more than anything else in the Bible.

I read a modern, disturbing version of the story recently. Peter Hawkins, Professor of Religion at Boston College, was in New York City to see the one-man performance of *The Gospel according to Mark*.

As he and his companion emerged from the theater, they were wrapped up in the beauty and power of the story of Jesus—exhilarated. Suddenly the door of a tavern opened and a very drunk man stumbled out and collapsed in front of them. "What would Jesus do?"

*"With the Gospel of Mark ringing in my ears, it was not possible to do what one normally does in New York when a door opens and someone hurtles forth. The challenge of the Parable of the Good Samaritan was palpable in the air that night. Of such is the Kingdom of God."*

So they picked up the drunk, took him by cab to his gorgeous Upper Eastside townhouse, and managed to open the door and get him inside. But the drunk didn't want their help—wasn't interested in the coming kingdom of God. Hawkins remembers, *"He wanted a drink; he wanted a smoke; he didn't care if he burned the whole building down; he wanted us to get out."*

It was clearly time to go, but Hawkins recalls they were stuck inside the parable along with the Samaritan. So they managed to commandeer an address book and started to call the man's friends, only to hear the same answer: "He's a spoiled, arrogant, abusive bully—and a drunk. Forget about it." So before they tiptoed out, Hawkins left his card and a note: "Please call if you'd like to talk."

The man never did. No thank-you note. No good neighbor award. Nothing. Hawkins concludes his account this way: *"Nonetheless, I wonder now if I stepped into eternal life without knowing it—by doing, however grudgingly, what had to be done"* ("The Samaritan Spends the Night," *Christian Century*, June 20-27, 2001).

What prompted Jesus to tell this story in the first place was a question: "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" That's a pretty good question: a question everyone asks sooner or later.

The one who asked it was a lawyer, skilled at asking questions in order to get information, but also in order to entangle and implicate. Jesus knows the lawyer knows the conventional answer to the question, so he responds with "What does the law say? You're a lawyer." "You shall love the Lord your God with heart, soul, strength, and mind—and your neighbor as yourself."

Everybody knew that. Judaism had already combined love of God and love of neighbor. But there always remained a vexing question: "But who exactly is my neighbor?" The law seemed to say your neighbor is your fellow Jew, someone very like you.

Then comes the story about a man, a Jew, walking down the treacherous seventeen-mile road from Jerusalem to Jericho, who was attacked, robbed, beaten, stripped naked, and left to die at the side of the road. A priest, walking the same route, saw him and passed by on the other side. A Levite, an assistant in the temple, did the same thing: saw the poor man and stepped around him.

Why didn't they stop and at least see if the man was dead or alive so they could report the incident to the authorities? The reasons are the same reasons you and I employ on our big city walks.

These are not bad people. If the priest stops and touches the man and the man is dead, the priest becomes ceremonially unclean. Then, he has no choice but to turn around and return to Jerusalem, find and purchase a red heifer, arrange for it to be sacrificed and reduced to ashes, and then go stand outside the East Gate of the city wall with other sinners for one week. Then he can resume his journey.

The Levite is probably on his way to a very important meeting.

The brilliance of this story is both that these people act like you and I would. And that the story turns a more conventional model of ethical exhortation upside down. The story should be about a good Jew who stops to help a hurt and hated, racially and religiously inferior Samaritan. If THAT happened, everybody would understand it and nod in agreement. That Jew is really a good guy!

But a good Samaritan? There is no such thing. For 700 years these people, the Samaritans had been a thorn in the flesh: an obstinate bunch of racial half-breeds with a watered-down form of Jewish religion and their own substitute temple. There was no such thing as a good Samaritan.

Who, Jesus asked the lawyer, who was a good neighbor? And the lawyer—now trapped—had to say, "Why, the one who showed mercy—the Samaritan."

What started out as a discussion of how to get into heaven, is now detoured into defining the neighbor I must love, and how I can be that neighbor.

Jesus has moved us from knowing to being; from abstractions to specificity.

Let's think for a moment about some of this innocent little story's larger implications.

Social theorists know that there is something potentially diabolical about the human self that needs some "other"—some stranger, outcast, inferior—in order to establish its own identity.

Jew–Samaritan

Christian–Arab infidel

German–Jew

White–Black

Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf describes the ethnic hostility between Croatian Catholics, Serbian Orthodox, and Bosnian Muslims in terms that gave the twentieth century perhaps the ugliest phrase in the English language: "Ethnic Cleansing." In Sarajevo, Volf reports, ethnic and religious hatred is so deep that even the clocks in the bell towers of churches are set differently—to define Croatian time and Serbian time.

Left to our own devices, human culture needs an "other," an outsider, to define insiders: a sinner to define the "righteous"; someone to be weak and helpless to define who is good and strong. And the great debate in this country continues to be about who is responsible to care for and about the "other," the "outsider;" the socially and economically disadvantaged, the poor.

The story of the Good Samaritan is a reminder that over against the grand narrative of culture that defines who is in and who is out, us and them, there is an alternative narrative, a narrative of reconciliation and compassion and mercy for all people. It is a narrative based on the life and teachings of Jesus and his notion that eternal life, true life in all its depth and fullness and joy, belongs to those who love and care and show mercy—those who, when confronted with human need, do what has to be done.

Miroslav Volf, writing in what seems like the impossibly conflicted and hopeless situation in his own country, writes:

*We need the grand vision of life filled with the Spirit of God. We need reminders that the impossible is possible. . . . But along with grand visions, we need stories of small successful steps of learning to live together. The grand vision and the small stories will together keep us on the journey. (Exclusion and Embrace, pp. 230-231)*

Closer to home, Pastor John Buchanan tells this small story...

*After Pearl Harbor, Japanese Americans were in a difficult place. Feelings ran very deeply: hostility, hatred, racism were common in all of life—newspapers, movies, radio. A small group of Japanese American Christians had been worshiping together in Chicago, but after Pearl Harbor, they lost their place of worship and restrictions were placed on their gatherings. The small community came to Fourth Presbyterian Church and asked permission to worship in their building.*

*The pastor, Harrison Ray Anderson, a strong patriot, a World War I veteran, knew what he had to do. He proposed that the Session grant permission to the Japanese American congregation to meet and worship at Fourth Presbyterian Church. The meeting was tumultuous. Strong feelings were expressed; the discussion was heated and lengthy. In the end, the vote was taken and permission granted, and the small Japanese American congregation met in the John Timothy Stone Chapel at 2:00 on Sunday afternoons all during World War II. Not everybody thought it was a good idea. It was a controversial decision within the church and the community. Harsh things were said. There were threats. Anderson responded by showing up outside Stone Chapel, on Delaware, before 2:00, to greet the Japanese American worshipers as they arrived.*

*The little congregation grew: their Sunday afternoon services were moved into Westminster Chapel and in 1947, they became Christ Church Presbyterian, a Japanese American congregation that remains part of the Presbytery of Chicago.*

A small story. But an eloquent reminder of the grand vision, the kingdom of God in which all are welcome, all are included, all are cared for and loved,

that kingdom in which a radical new truth is lived, namely that eternal life, real, true, authentic human life, life given, blessed, and forever kept safe in the heart of God, is given to those who love, who live for others, who give their lives away.

You know, this story began with a very personal question—about personal salvation. This is not about social action, finally. It is about you and me—our lives, our hopes, our fulfillment, our salvation.

I wonder if the lawyer who asked the question ever realized, as he heard this remarkable story, that the Good Samaritan was standing right in front of him.

That, finally, is the word here. He comes to be with us, to the roadside, to wherever we are, and whenever we are on the outside looking in, whenever we are rejected or alone or sick in spirit, or working so hard our lives seem to be slipping through our fingers, asking in quiet desperation: "What must I do to live?"

He comes. Jesus Christ comes to pick us up and bind up our wounds and bring us home to our true and best self, to live again, fully, generously, gratefully, loving God and the neighbor who needs us, doing what has to be done.

Amen.

*Dear God, the lawyer's question "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" is our question too. It is why we are here this morning. So open us again to the surprising news that your love and our life are gifts, that to receive them we are called to love our neighbors as you have so loved us. Startle us, O God, with that truth, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*