

## Love God, Love Your Neighbor

July 13, 2025

The Parable of the Good Samaritan is one that most of us can quickly recall from our Sunday school lessons or from just hearing the tale retold in so many ways over the years. We have probably told it to our children and grandchildren in story books. In fact, the story is so widely recognized that there is even a “Good Samaritan Law” that protects any of us from major liability when we respond, in good faith, to the emergency aid of someone injured or distressed. This parable is a fantastic story and one that certainly does compel all of us to consider our own role in helping others, or more in the spirit of the tale, loving our neighbor.

In its most simple form, the Parable of the Good Samaritan entails a man traveling the path from Jerusalem to Jericho. Along the trail he was attacked by robbers, beaten and looted of all his belongings, left naked and bleeding. Sometime later a priest came along the path, crossed to the other side and did not aid the man. Likewise, soon after the priest another man happened along, a Levite, and he too crossed to the other side leaving the injured man without aid. Finally, a Samaritan man came along the trail and he took pity, assisted the man by bandaging his wounds, loaded the man on his donkey and brought him to an inn, even giving the innkeeper money to look after the man. This is the simple version of the story that most of us recall.

Taking a closer look at this wonderful parable, there is much more for us to ponder. Putting it into context, just before this parable, as we learned in our scripture and sermon last Sunday, in Luke 9 *“Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, <sup>2</sup> and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal the sick.”* Then in Luke 10, Jesus expanded from the twelve disciples to seventy two teachers, Luke 10:1- *“After this the Lord appointed seventy-two<sup>[a]</sup> others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go.”* They were his emissaries rooting out evil demons and spreading the good news of God and they had all returned to report that, *“Lord even the demons submit to us in your name.”* (Luke 10:17) These were times unlike any that we can imagine. This remarkable and charismatic prophet, Jesus, was attracting incredible followers, creating amazing demonstrations of healing and even foretelling his own persecution and death. How could anyone make this story up? Can we believe that everyone that witnessed these events would have totally believed in what was happening?

So upon this joyous return of so many of his believers, one might imagine a festive gathering, perhaps a mix of totally devout believers but maybe a few that were not entirely convinced of this prophet. It was then that an expert in the law put Jesus to a test

by asking *“Teacher, he asked, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”* Jesus answered him by asking *“What is written in the law?”* to which the legal expert responded, *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind”*<sup>[c]</sup>; and, *“Love your neighbor as yourself.”* (Luke 10: 25- 27)

As a sidebar, these two laws were well ascribed Jewish fundamentals of faith:

**Deuteronomy 6:5** <sup>5</sup> **Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your being, and all your strength.**

**Leviticus 19:18** <sup>18</sup> **You must not take revenge nor hold a grudge against any of your people; instead, you must love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord.**

The legal expert further identified a neighbor as one who shows mercy and compassion. In order to further illustrate to his followers the importance of these laws, Jesus then went on to tell a story, the parable we know as the Good Samaritan and to answer the question *“And who is my neighbor?”*. (Luke 10:29). We have heard the parable in today’s scripture from Luke. Luke was described by theologians as a physician and a historian, following Mark sequentially in his writing but likely simultaneous with Matthew. He was intent on writing an accurate history of the life of Jesus and so Luke has given us a number of parables that are not repeated in other books of the Bible, the Good Samaritan being one .

As Jesus tells this story to the legal expert that questioned him and others gathered, he told of the poor traveler, likely a Jew but not discernable without his clothing, left for dead, robbed of all possessions along the road to Jericho.

The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was known for its danger and treacherous terrain, a distance of 17 miles and a descent from about 2,500 feet above sea level to about 800 feet below sea level (3300 ft total ) , kind of like a mini-Grand Canyon location. The road ran through rocky, desert country, which provided places for robbers to waylay defenseless travelers.

The first two travelers to ignore the injured man, a priest and a Levite, could have had strong religious concerns about ritual impurity, which likely justified their inaction in their times. According to Jewish tradition, they could contract impurity by touching a dead or unclean body or if so much as their shadow touched the body—thus they passed by on the other side of the road! Priests and Levites avoided impurity whenever possible. This would be a prime concern for the priest. Levites were consecrated as God’s special tribe in place of the firstborn of all the Israelites . Their role was to assist the priests in the service of the temple, so a similar worry about impurity. Both groups, priests and Levites, may have been considered among the higher classes and perhaps would not as readily consider affiliating with common unknown travelers.

Then Jesus tells of the Samaritan traveler who immediately stopped to care for the injured and robbed man. Most remarkable to those hearing Jesus tell this parable was the fact that Samaritans and Gentiles were among the most despised outcasts in Jewish culture. A Samaritan was rejected by the faith, a type of racial 'half-breed', since he had mixed Jewish and Gentile blood and represented a defection from Judaism. The fact that such a 'half-breed' could show compassion was a surprise in the parable, perhaps an actual shock value added to the story by Jesus to emphasize his message that ALL people are our neighbors. Samaritans are regarded as a third category, with animosity very common between Samaritans and Jews, but it is interesting to note that Jesus himself did not subscribe to the general Jewish procedures of avoiding Samaritan territory when travelling, just as Pastor Dan described Jesus passing through Samaria a couple of Sunday's past. Imagine how the listeners, hearing Jesus tell this story reconciled the fact a Samaritan of all people, was the hero showing compassion in this parable.

A common misconception about the Parable of the Good Samaritan is that it simply teaches people to help strangers in need, regardless of their identity or background. While compassion is indeed a core message, the parable's true depth lies in its challenge to our own prejudices and the expectation of who our "neighbor" is.

By depicting the Samaritan as the example to be followed and the representatives of conventional religion as the examples to be avoided, the parable issues a challenge not only to Jews but to Christians as well. According to our Methodist founder, John Wesley's notes, *"Let us go and do likewise, regarding every man as our neighbor who needs our assistance. Let us renounce that bigotry and party-zeal which would contract our hearts into an insensibility for all the human race, but a small number whose sentiments and practice are so much our own, that our love to them is but self-love reflected"* Wesleyans believe God has bound all people together, no matter how different, by creating each of us in God's image. God has made us all neighbors.

How far do we modern day Methodists take this "loving our neighbor" practice in our daily lives today?

Of course, we eagerly take care to comfort our family, friends, and church members. We volunteer to serve meals, we help with bread give away, with the food pantry, with flood buckets, and many other worthy causes that we support. Do we welcome and encourage other people that are out of our comfort zone, like a Jew or Levite potentially helping an outcast Samaritan? I would like to think that we have come a long way over the past 2,000 years. I did have a co-worker who would carry simple food snacks in her bag to

share with street people in need. I used to always drop some change or a bill in the hat of the subway or airport musicians in Chicago.

Of course, there was the ultimate effort last year in Minneapolis when a number of Good Samaritan citizens jumped from their own cars to rescue a man that had crashed off the freeway. What would any of us do in this situation?

I am not suggesting that we stop at every freeway off ramp to give money to each street person. Not all of us may feel safe to jump out on the freeway to aid another motorist in an accident.

I hope that what each of us CAN do is to consider who our neighbors may be. We can think about our neighbors across the street, down the aisle in the grocery store, at our kids' school or walking into our church doors as a newcomer. We do not need to be as heroic as the original Good Samaritan but we can share kindness and care for all. We can reach out in acceptance to those that are different from us in whatever way. It's those simple, every day acts of kindness that can effect each of us and our neighbors all around us. And while we are focused on thinking about loving our neighbors, lets us all remember the other law that was key to this story; Love our God, with all our hearts and all our strength. Love your God and Love your neighbors.

Thanks be to God.