

INTRODUCTION

Today we are considering the teaching of Jesus in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. This is so very familiar to us! Our challenge is to hear it/see it through a lens of Biblical justice, which has been our focus in recent weeks.

The three travelers on the Jericho road were steeped in the OT. They are familiar with this passage from Leviticus. They are well versed in biblical justice: Mishpat - Acts of justice and mercy, motivated by hesed/lovingkindness and compassion, with the goal of tzadequah or righteousness/right relationships.

The first two travelers are “religious” - they well know God’s commandments and concern for the most vulnerable. So, with this understanding of biblical justice as our lens or filter, let us listen afresh to this familiar passage.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan

²⁵On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

²⁶“What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?”

²⁷He answered, “‘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, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

²⁸“You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.”

²⁹But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

³⁰In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. ³²So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. ³⁴He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’”

³⁶“Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”

³⁷The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.”
Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”

PRAY

It was an ordinary day when Cameron Hellopeter, a 20-year-old film student in NYC was heading down to catch the train. Suddenly he fell to the ground, struggled up again and stumbled to the edge of the subway platform. In the grip of a seizure, he tumbled down onto the railway tracks, just as an approaching train began to cause the platform to shake.

Numerous people saw this as they crowded the platform, hoping to board the next train. Some averted their eyes. Some froze helplessly. Some hurried on their way. One, Wesley Autrey, a middle-aged black man from Harlem, literally jumped into action.

Leaping down onto the tracks, Wes covered Cameron’s body with his own. Held against the ground while the train thundered over them, he protected Cameron until the train passed. Wesley made a split-second decision to get involved because it was the “right” thing to do.

The story of the Good Samaritan is so familiar that we cease to be amazed or challenged by it.

A lawyer engages Jesus in conversation by asking a question: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” I wonder, what was he really asking, since an inheritance is received when another has died. I do not think eternal life is something we can “inherit”.

Jesus answers this question with another question (don’t you hate that?). “What is written in the Law?” Jesus replied. “How do you read it?”

The lawyer gives a textbook answer: “‘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, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Even if grading on a curve, he gets an A plus!

“AH, yes! Do this and you will live!” This is the “secret” or “key” to a fulfilling life!

Just do this!

However,...the lawyer is not done asking questions: “Who is my neighbor?”

Implicit in the question is that there is a limit...a boundary...a fence beyond which persons on the far side are NOT neighbors.

He seems to be asking: Just what are the limits of Love, Jesus? Can you be more specific? Are neighbors those who live next door? Across the street? Down the road? Are neighbors those who have identical Trump or Biden signs in their yard as I do in mine? The same ethnic background or the same religion or same sorority or fraternity, club, or organization - whatever category or label we might name?

Jesus does *not* engage in theoretical hair splitting regarding the definition of “neighbor”. And clearly, Jesus is *not* Presbyterian because he does not form a committee to study the definition of and practice of “neighborliness”! (I am joking!!)

Nope. Instead, Jesus tells a story. One you and I know quite well. However, I hope we can begin to hear this story afresh - with first century Jewish ears and hear the scandal in it.

On occasion we have been busy, preoccupied. Perhaps we identify with the priest and Levite - too hurried to get involved. We have important things to do, people to see, places to go. And perhaps the person is not too badly hurt? We make up excuses and go our way, perhaps even praying that God will see to the need of the injured person.

On better days we identify with the Samaritan, and we recall an occasion when we came to the aid of another - the injured or ill, unemployed, or one in dire need.

But what if this is a reversal story? Perhaps the whole point of the story is that the Samaritan is NOT us.

At the time Jesus told this story the enmity between the Jews and Samaritans was ancient, entrenched, embittered. The two groups disagreed about everything that mattered: how and where to worship God, how to interpret scripture and much more. Ok, to put a fine point on it. They hated each other's guts.

Jesus' choice to make the Samaritan the hero of this story was nothing less than shocking to first century ears. Samaritans were the hated enemy. The "other", despised, somehow less than human. The object of both fear and disgust, ones to be reviled, outcast. (journeywithjesus.net/essays/1023 Debi Thomas)

Today Jesus might tell the story differently depending upon his listeners: to those in the Indian subcontinent, the story might be about the Good Dalit - one from the lowest caste/an "untouchable"; to the Jewish community today, the story might be about the Good Neo-Nazi or member of Hamas...do you hear the difference? Jesus is dangerously expanding the definition of neighbor to include yes, even one's enemy!

Who of the three was neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" asked Jesus. (v.36)

For the lawyer, "neighbor" is a noun. "Neighbor" is an object to whom one owes duties - burdensome duties that the lawyer desires to avoid (v.29). For Jesus, "neighbor" is a verb, a way of behaving toward people in need that gives life to both giver and receiver. A more accurate translation of Jesus' question in v. 36 is this: "Who of the three *became* a neighbor [or *showed* neighborliness]...?" (gegonenai)

For Jesus, one does not *have* a neighbor; one *is* a neighbor, or better, *becomes* a neighbor.

To be a neighbor is not a condition one inherits, in other words, but a choice one makes to render the tangible assistance to those in need of it, and to render it irrespective of ethnic, religious, cultic, or racial differences.

This is the meaning of biblical justices: to act with mercy motivated by loving compassion with the goal of right relationships.

The lawyer does not expect the conclusion to which the parable leads him; the fact that he cannot bring himself to say "the Samaritan" in answer to Jesus' question may betray his difficulty in accepting the full ramifications of the parable. But if he will not acknowledge the neighbor, he at least acknowledges neighborliness, "to show mercy" (v.37).

Anyone who "goes and does likewise" (v.37) fulfills the heart of the parable. (James Edwards, Luke Commentary, P. 323-4)

While this is a fictional story which Jesus tells in response to the question of the "lawyer", it rings true. Who among us has not at one time or another been in need of rescue or help, as was the man left for dead by the side of the road?

And

Who among us has not happened by such a person in need?

The question arises: What is the cost of stopping to help?

- * there is the cost of our time. We are busy people. We have important things to do.
- * there is the cost of compassion. IF we allow ourselves to feel lovingkindness (hesed) we will be moved to act with justice and mercy!
- * there is the cost of getting involved - it means getting our hands dirty, literally or figuratively. (The priest and Levite would become "ritually unclean" had they gotten involved, which would have added further delay as they would be required to take time and energy to engage in ritual cleansing in order to resume their duties.)
- * there is the actual monetary cost - the Samaritan secures food and lodging, promising to foot the bill for any extra medical care that is needed. These costs could quickly add up to a considerable sum. This person is generous despite the monetary cost.

To get involved is to risk becoming a victim oneself, as this was a roadway notorious for such attacks. Perhaps those who attacked the first victim were simply hiding, waiting to jump anyone else who might stop, in an attempt to help.

What do we know about the Samaritan? He dared to come close and draw near to the injured person. He is moved by compassion. He is a person of means. He does not let fear prevent him from acting, even some personal risks and cost. He did

what he hopes another would do for him. He acts as Jesus would act. He behaves as a neighbor would behave.

The “expert in the Law” who was questioning Jesus, knew what the Law required. He was looking for a loophole. But the mercy – love - righteousness of God demands and compels us to act justly toward those in need, no matter the cost!

To do justice is to engage in acts of mercy and compassion and live-giving relationships - and to do so without regard to human categories and labels we all too quickly assign to others: Labels of age/sex/race or ethnicity/religious or political difference.

I would add one more false category: Deserving. It is not ours to decide whom deserves or does not deserve help. Bottom line? “While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” “God so loved the world...”! God’s grace, of which we are recipients - is lavished upon us all. God shows no partiality, a fact repeated from OT to NT.

Today many are being beaten up by Covid19 and its impact on our economy, through no fault of their own.

Were you or I beaten, disabled, lying on the roadside - I daresay - we would not be selective or refuse help from a hated enemy...we would be grateful for any compassion shown to us?

How does the love and justice of God compel us to respond??

Let us pray...