

Perception

Luke 10:25-37

²⁵Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ²⁶He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" ²⁷He 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 neighbor as yourself." ²⁸And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." ²⁹But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" ³⁰Jesus 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. ³¹Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³²So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. ³⁴He 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. ³⁵The 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.' ³⁶Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" ³⁷He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

I attended the 222nd General Assembly in Portland Oregon in June, as a member of the Advisory Committee on the Constitution, class of 2016. A former presbytery moderator, who serves as a judge in a neighboring county, said when he sentenced someone to three years in prison, they got out in 18 months. When presbytery elected you to a three year term, you served EVERY SINGLE DAY! The term of service on the Advisory Committee on the Constitution is SIX years, and I was the only member of the class of 2016 to serve every single day of those six years; my two classmates were each elected to fill unexpired terms.

I spent 13 days in Oregon. The Class of 2022 of the ACC was duly elected, welcomed most heartily by the class of 2016, and my term ended at the conclusion of the assembly. I spent three and a half more days in Portland, vacationing, but that's hard work, too!

So when Pastor Chris called me and asked if I could preach this Sunday, I thought yeah, sure, why not? The ACC doesn't have a hold on my time any more. I glanced at the lectionary for this Sunday, saw Luke 10, and figured, hey, the story of Martha and Mary, I've got that sermon . . . piece of cake!

Well, my time on the ACC is done, but my presbytery work kicked in to fill the void that wasn't there. By the time I looked up the Luke passage – and had already told Becky to put that in the bulletin – I realized it was the parable of the Good Samaritan! Didn't already have a sermon on that!

This is not just the parable of the Samaritan helping someone. It's a parable within a parable. It starts with a lawyer, and not just any lawyer, but one that is "an expert in the law of Moses."¹ This lawyer thinks he will test Jesus, so he asks Jesus a question – "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus answers this question with a question – "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" The lawyer answers with the "Great Commandment", that is "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 neighbor as yourself." Okay, advantage to the Lawyer. But Jesus, following the unwritten rule of TV courtroom shows and children's sermons, you know, the rule that you don't ask a question you don't know the answer to, tells the lawyer he has answered correctly, and then says, "do this, and you will live." Point to Jesus, match is tied.

The lawyer can't help himself - he wants to show off his righteousness - he has to ask another question! So he asks Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" This time, Jesus doesn't answer this question with a question, he answers with a parable!

¹ The New Oxford Annotated Bible, Michael D. Coogan, editor; Oxford University Press, 2001; page 118 New Testament

Jesus tells the story of a man who has been to Jerusalem, and is now traveling down to Jericho. Not only is the 18 mile road from Jerusalem to Jericho a study in elevation – there is a drop from Jerusalem at 2500 feet above sea level, to Jericho, which is about 800 feet below sea level² – but the road is treacherous due to thieves and gangs preying on travelers.

This man is traveling alone and is set upon by robbers, who beat him, strip him of his possessions including his clothes, and leave him for dead. So they've not only robbed him financially and physically, but they've robbed him of his dignity by taking his clothes.

Jesus goes on to say that a priest came by, saw the man, and crossed over to the other side of the road. A Levite then comes by, sees the man, and he, too, crosses to the other side of the road. Both the priest and the Levite see the man, recognize that he is either dead or almost dead, but keep on going.

The priest and the Levite were the church professionals; everyone knows they were supposed to stop and help the man. That's not just our perception of religious professionals, it was their job, right? So everyone hearing this story would be waiting for the ordinary human to come along, in this case, it would be a faithful Jew.³ But, according to Jesus, here comes a Samaritan. A Samaritan!

There was tension between the Jews and the Samaritans. The Samaritans were considered foreigners. Luke tells us in Chapter 9 that the Samaritans refused hospitality to Jesus as Jesus and his disciples were headed to Jerusalem. So this is an unexpected twist to the story!

The parable says that “Now by chance a priest was going down that road...” and “Likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side” . . .

² Ibid, 118 NT.

³ Thanks to Alyson Janke, in her sermon for July 10, 2016.

But the parable says the Samaritan “while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity.” Sounds like the Samaritan was travelling carefully, staying on the road, staying alert.

This is not the reaction a Jew would expect from a Samaritan – pity.

And the Samaritan doesn't just feel pity for the wounded man, he stops and tends to him, bandaging his wounds, letting him ride his donkey, taking him to an inn, and caring for him overnight. The next day the Samaritan pays the innkeeper to let the man stay and recover; he tells the innkeeper he will be back and will settle up for any additional money owed for the wounded man's stay during his recovery.

Jesus now asks the lawyer a question – “which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” The lawyer gives the right answer – “the one who showed mercy” and Jesus then tells the lawyer to “Go and do likewise.” Game, set, match to Jesus.

Sounds easy, right? Do good, show mercy and kindness, be a neighbor.

After 13 days in Oregon, I came home for two days and then headed to the Tennessee River with my husband Greg and our dog for the 4th of July. No family or friends – they were scared off by the forecast of rain.

We took the boat out Friday afternoon, but came back in after a couple of hours – there were a lot of people out on their boats, and you could tell a lot of them were people who only got their boats out two weekends a year – Memorial Day and 4th of July! Overcrowded boats, speeding boats, careless boaters! We retreated to the safety of our porch!

Saturday was a little overcast and a lot hot. We didn't think we would stay out in the boat too long, so we packed a small cooler with water and soft drinks, and headed out. We decided to head

to Clifton to top off our gas tanks. The Clifton marina only has two gas pumps, and the marina was packed with boaters. By the time we were able to get gas, we needed it!

We headed back up the river, searching for calmer water. Careless boaters were everywhere! We decided to turn around and head home. Greg drove fairly slowly, staying alert to potential danger from the many careless boaters.

Greg suddenly slowed down and asked if I thought a boat was sinking. I looked up and saw a shiny red Stratus that did, indeed, seem to be getting lower in the water. We headed over to them to see if they needed any help, dodging boats and jet skiers. Have I mentioned the careless boaters?

As we got closer to the boat, we saw there were three people on the boat, along with a Jack Russell terrier, an inner tube, an inflatable rowboat, two coolers, and all the stuff necessary for a day on the water. One of the men was working to unscrew the boat seats, the other man was tossing stuff into the inner tube and the rowboat, and the woman was frantically waving and yelling for help. The dog was running back and forth between all three people.

Greg pulled up and the woman jumped off the boat, causing the dog to bark and become even more agitated. I admit I was agitated too, since she didn't have on a life vest. She grabbed some rope and started swimming to us, hoping to tie their boat to ours. The dog tried to grab the rope – I guess she thought she was going to pull the woman back in!

It took about five minutes for the boat to sink, but it felt like five seconds. It took about 15 minutes to get all the stuff, the people, and the dog, into our boat, but it felt like 15 hours.

The entire time the three of them and the two of us were reaching and pulling and loading stuff into our boat, there was a steady stream of boaters going by. Many went by too close and

too fast – and crossed to the other side of the river. A lot of boaters stopped - and watched. The only other boat that stopped to help was a boat full of young people – one of the guys had a cast on his arm! – and they were all reaching and grabbing stuff that was floating away. They came up beside us and handed over all the stuff they picked up.

There was a really scary moment when the boat flipped and one of the men was under the boat, under water. But he came back up, still calm, and swam to our boat.

We got Patrick, his wife, Bethany, and their son, Marshall, settled on our boat, along with Daisy the dog. There were no wounds to bandage; everyone had escaped serious injury. Except the boat.

We then did what all ordinary humans do - we all pulled out our cell phones to call the TWRA, but the TWRA pulled up beside us as we were all searching for the number. Someone flagged them down and sent them to us. Two men in a ski boat stopped and tied a rope onto the sunken boat – now vertical in the water – and began dragging it to the bank.

Oh, and the entire time we were all struggling with the sinking boat, there was a line of people on the bank, most sitting on ATVs, watching, talking, laughing. No one threw out a line, offered to help, launched a dinghy, nothing.

The late Elie Wiesel said, "The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference." Indifference to people in danger, indifference to people who need help. Indifference sounds like the priest and the Levite.

As we waited on the bank for the family to give their statements to the TWRA, make a decision about what to do with the sunken boat, decide how to get back to their campsite (we offered to drive them and their stuff to their campsite), we watched a still steady stream of gawkers go by.

Marshall came over and said the TWRA was going to take his mom to the campsite to get their jeep, and his dad was going to stay with the boat, hoping to get it out of the water. Marshall was elected to unload all their stuff, and stay with it on the bank.

Marshall thanked us, and promised us they were all okay– they had insurance on the boat! – so we left and headed back. We were quiet all the way back. Both of us thought that Daisy needed a life jacket if she was going to get out in a boat ever again.

The Gospel of Luke is unique in a lot of ways – it is the longest book in the New Testament, and it contains a lot of stories and material not found in any of the other gospels. The story of the “Good Samaritan” is one of those stories not found in the other gospels. One recurring theme in Luke is ministry to the excluded or disadvantaged, with special concern for outcasts, victims of oppression, and others that are at a disadvantage in society.⁴

Remember the lawyer and his test for Jesus? What can he do to inherit eternal life? The Gospel of Luke also stresses salvation as a reality to be experienced here and now⁵ as well as with a future aspect. The lawyer asking to inherit eternal life misses the point – Jesus is the salvation.

Who is our neighbor? Jesus says it is the one who shows mercy, who helps the stranger. In her book, *Short Stories of Jesus*, A.J. Levine says that “...love of God is the ground of one’s being and the guide for one’s life.”⁶ In other words, she says, “to love means to act.”⁷ It means you don’t cross the street to avoid someone or something that could be a problem. It means you stop and help a boater in distress. It means you live your life in gratitude to God’s goodness.

⁴ Powell, Mark Allen, *Introducing the New Testament*, Baker Academics, Grand Rapids, MI, 2009, p. 159.

⁵ *Ibid*, p 161.

⁶ Levine, Amy-Jill, *Short Stories by Jesus*, HarperCollins, New York, 2014, p. 82.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 82.

In A. J. Levine's story about the Samaritan, there is a link to the famous sermon by The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "I've Been to the Mountaintop." Dr. King uses this parable in his sermon; he said, I didn't ask, if I stop and help, what will happen to me; instead, he said, he asked if I don't stop, what will happen to the man. Dr. King preached this sermon in Memphis on April 3, 1968, one day before he was assassinated.⁸

We like to think that we will reach out, we will help, but honestly, sometimes it is easier not to do anything, or to assume someone else will help. And even harder is to think of who our neighbor is – every day we are constantly reminded of the violence between groups of people who cannot or will not think of each other as neighbors. From Orlando to Minneapolis, Baton Rouge to Dallas, the Middle East, Nashville, refugee camps, people are unwilling or unable to see each other as neighbors.

Jesus helps us with this – he uses a Samaritan to make his point that we are all neighbors. And he uses a lawyer to remind us of what we are to do: "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 neighbor as yourself."

May it be so.

Amen.

⁸ http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documententry/ive_been_to_the_mountaintop/