

Neighbors

Luke 10:25-37

For more than a year, my youngest son went to speech therapy every Friday. He really enjoyed going to see the language specialist. Our therapist was amazing. She was kind, very knowledgeable, and the most important thing is that she connected with Dominik. I have no doubt that my youngest son really enjoyed spending time with Miss Mandy. However, I also believe that he really liked the mid-morning, Friday trips because after every session he would ask either my wife, my father or me to take him across the street for a Happy Meal.

I remember one specific Friday after the therapy session, I took him for a Happy Meal. We went through the drive-through. I placed the order, paid for it, and went to the pick-up window to get the Happy Meal.

The person on the other side of the window was handing me the order when I heard my son saying with lots of frustration: “Dad, I said I want a Happy Meal.” I did not pay much attention to what he was saying. Yet, when I turned around to give him the food, I noticed he was not a happy camper. He had put on his pouting face. Ironically, the Happy Meal was not making him that happy.

So, he said to me once again, “Daddy, I said I want a Happy Meal.” With love and patience I said, “Here is your Happy Meal.” But he replied, “That’s not a Happy Meal. A Happy Meal doesn’t come in a bag! A Happy Meal comes in a box!” Then, I realized that his reaction was because of the packaging. I said, “Dominik, just look inside and you will find your Happy Meal.” He looked in the bag and then exclaimed, “This is my Happy Meal!!! Look, I got a toy!!!”

Here is what I learned that morning. At times, we are at risk of discarding blessings because they come to us wrapped differently. There are times when new and fruitful opportunities, meaningful relationships, great learning experiences, potential breakthroughs, etc., are presented to us in unconventional ways. We need to be very careful of not making our immediate reaction one of dismissal. If we take the time to look in the package, instead of impulsively discounting it, we will realize how God is abundantly providing for each of our needs.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan is a great example of this principle. We could say that one of messages of the parable is this: “Be careful!,” says Jesus. “Pay attention!!! You may be missing and dismissing your neighbor because he/she has been branded in a certain way.” The truth is that there is a virus called “stigma” that infects and affects the way think about, feel about, see and respond to others.

I want to take a few moments to take a look at the layers of good news we find in The Parable of the Good Samaritan.

The narrative opens with the moment when Jesus engaged in a conversation with a legal expert. Wanting to put Jesus to the test, the lawyer asked a question, “what must I do to gain eternal life?” Jesus replied with another question, “What is written in the Law? How do you interpret it?” (vv. 25-26). It is in this moment when a reversal takes place. The one who was trying to test, the lawyer, is now being tested.

The answer of the legal expert came straight from the Law. “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself” (v. 27). Certainly, the lawyer responded to Jesus’ question, “What is written in the Law?” However, he did not answer Jesus’ second question, “How do you interpret the law?” Instead, in an attempt to regain his authority and the control of the conversation, the lawyer threw back at Jesus the question concerning the interpretation of the Law. He did so by asking, “who is my neighbor?” (v. 29). Then the well-known parable was told.

When we hear about this parable, we usually make an emphasis on the Good Samaritan as an example of discipleship. Through this text, we have been invited several times to be good Samaritans in the world. Even though I don’t disagree with such an emphasis, I think the intent of the parable is of another nature. More than a call to be good Samaritans, the parable was told to help us recognize who is our neighbor.

“*A man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho*” (v. 30a). Jesus placed the parable in a very familiar context. Most people in Jerusalem knew the dangers associated with traveling the Jerusalem-Jericho way. This road was arid, narrow, and featured desert-like conditions. Also, it was known that bandits actually targeted people traveling the Jerusalem-Jericho road. So, when Jesus said, “a man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho” his listeners surely recognized the dangers that this journey posed. It was a familiar context.

So, the traveler “encountered thieves, who stripped him naked, beat him up, and left him near death” (v. 30b). Other versions say that the man was half dead. Focusing on a different word choice, we could also say the man was half alive.

When I think about this specific moment in the story, I think of the many times we, as individuals, are beaten by circumstances, actions, and the destructive words and attitudes of others and ourselves. When I think of the half dead (or half alive) state of the traveler in Jesus’ parable, I am reminded that there are times when we journey under similar conditions: half alive emotionally, half-alive spiritually.

Half alive moments are difficult to navigate. In a half alive condition, there is a lack of deep and meaningful connections even when we are surrounded by people. Half alive people know first-hand that movement does not mean progress, because, even though there are several things going on in their lives, they feel stuck. Dreary will, frail motivation, anemic hope, and collapsing joy are some of the symptoms of being half alive.

But hear the good news. As it was with the half alive traveler in Jesus' parable, so it is with us. When we are struggling with feelings of hopelessness and helplessness, let us find comfort in this text—*help is indeed on the way*. It does not matter how badly you have been beaten, *help is indeed on the way*. Yet, you need to remember that Divine breakthroughs may come from a different direction than expected.

It is at this point where Jesus' parable gets complicated. The context is not going to be as familiar as it was at the beginning of the story. Jesus will get creative. He will develop an unforeseen plot to drive his message home.

“So, a priest and a Levite went down the same road but when they saw the injured man, they crossed over to the other side of the road and went on their way” (vv. 32-33). “³³ A Samaritan, who was on a journey, came to where the man was. But when he saw him, he was moved with compassion. ³⁴ He bandaged his wounds... Then he placed the wounded man on his own donkey, took him to an inn, and took care of him.”

As most of you know, Jews and Samaritans did not get along. They had a mutual dislike and enmity. They mocked each other. They despised and equally undermined one another.

It is in this environment of conflict and opposition that Jesus tells the story we are looking at today. In fact, Jesus told The Parable of *The Good Samaritan* because he was talking to Jewish people in Jewish territory. Yet scholars believe, and I agree with them, had Jesus been speaking to Samaritans, he would have told the parable of “The Good Jew.”

This parable can have many titles. Bringing it more to our days, Jesus would have told “The Parable of the Good Syrian” right in the middle of the expansion of ISIS and the refugee crisis in Syria. Amidst the conversations on immigration, Jesus would have addressed our nation with “The Parable of the Good Immigrant.” To people struggling with Muslims, Jesus would have told “The Parable of the Good Muslim.” Here is the point, “‘Neighbor’ is not a vague (romantic) ethical principle to Jesus; ‘neighbors’ are real and challenging persons with whom any possible relationships have to be painstakingly worked through.”¹

With the parable, Jesus is helping us answer the question “*who is my neighbor?*” This requires us to see beyond ourselves, our likes and dislikes, our **definitions, presumptions, biases, and expectations**. Seeing our neighbors requires us to understand and embrace that neighbors come to us with unfamiliar faces and even repulsive labels.

Jesus was asked the question, “*Who is my neighbor?*”. However, Jesus did not respond to the question, at least not directly. Jesus answered the question by asking another question, “*who was a neighbor to the man who encountered thieves?*” (v. 36). **Why did Jesus ask this question?**

¹ Long, Thomas G. 2017. “The Love of God and the Love of Neighbor.” *Journal for Preachers* 41 (1): 21–30. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a6h&AN=ATLAIgFE171218002966&site=ehost-live>.

When I think about the question the lawyer asked, “*Who is my neighbor?*”, I am reminded of the saying that goes like, “*You can choose your neighbor, but you cannot choose your relatives.*” Perhaps, the lawyer wanted to choose his neighbor. The person he liked, he had some affinity with, the person he thought to be on the right side of things. Yet, Jesus gave him an example where the neighbor was the extreme opposite of what the lawyer would have chosen.

I believe that with his answer, formulated in part as a question, “*who was a neighbor?*”, Jesus was saying to the legal expert, “*Don’t go through life trying to find or identify your neighbor; instead, go through life being a neighbor.*” That’s why at the very end Jesus charged the legal expert with the words, “go and do likewise.” Think about this: **Don’t try to find your neighbors. You already have them. Just be a neighbor!**

What does it mean to be a neighbor?

Being a neighbor means attending to people despite their ethnicity, religion, preferences and political views. Being a good neighbor means breaking off with the obsession of stereotyping others. It means giving up unhealthy, sometimes inherited social traditions of ill feelings toward certain people who look, act, and think in a different way. Being a good neighbor means recognizing that the people whom we have differences with, and therefore we may demonize, not only deserve love, but also have the capacity to love and do good. Don’t try to find your neighbors. You already have them.

If you want to answer the question, “who is my neighbor?”, think about who your Samaritans are. Think about who makes your skin crawl. Think about the person whom you don’t want to look in the eye and deprive from a friendly greeting. Think about the person you treat with some degree of decency, but you do it because it proves you are a better person. We all have our Samaritans and we need to know they are our neighbors.

Here is how I want to close this time of reflection. I want us all to see ourselves as the person who was beaten and left to die. Many of us have received a heavy baggage full of labels, presumptions, biases, and expectations. Such baggage has crushed us and left us half dead. Yet, Jesus Christ, the greatest Samaritan, has come to our rescue. We have been saved, taken to the inn, the church (our rehabilitation place), where we are becoming whole again so we can go out into the world to be neighbors.

The Word of God for the people of God. Amen.