

## **LIFE IN THE SPIRIT: 7. Merciful Neighbor**

Amos 7:7-17; Luke 10:25-37

Nan Adams preached this sermon July 11, 2010, the 15<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time,  
Trinity Presbyterian Church, Pensacola, FL.

The gospel story from Luke is so familiar to many of us that it is hard to read or hear it carefully anymore. It is known as the parable or story of the "Good Samaritan" even in its title above the text in our pew Bibles. But please take special note that the word "good" does not appear in the body of the text. Matter of fact, Jesus introduces the Samaritan in the story as simply "a man (who) was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho." For hundreds of generations we have heard the story and have laid upon this man the adjective "good." It's just part of the story now – he was a *good* Samaritan. Gone is the radical shock of the story of its first hearers who could no more call a Samaritan "good" than possibly imagine that humans would one day walk the moon's surface. It just couldn't be. Saying "good Samaritan" was like saying "good Al Qaeda terrorist" so despised were the Samaritans by the Jews. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Jesus is confronted in this story by a lawyer – a person trained in matters of both secular and religious law because in his day the laws are one in the same. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus answers his question with a question, "What is written in the law?" or, in other words, "What do you read printed there in the words of the law?" The lawyer 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."

Indeed, love God with everything you have and are, your whole life. "God's claim on us reaches to every area of our experience, to our innermost being (heart); our...individual identity (soul); our energy, resolve, and resources (strength); and our understanding and intellectual capacities (mind). No part of ourselves is to be withheld from God."<sup>1</sup>

Jesus said, "You have given the right answer. Do this, and you will live."

But the lawyer, being well-versed in the nuances of law language, was not going to let this drop so easily. "Could you state your terms a little more precisely, Jesus? Just what do you mean by 'neighbor'? Who exactly is my neighbor?"

It was in response to that question that Jesus tells the parable of the Samaritan. It's about a man who is traveling the road from Jerusalem to Jericho who is mugged by robbers and left bleeding and near death beside the road. Now there's nothing terribly unusual about this situation – this road was notoriously dangerous, riddled with bandits and thieves, unsafe to travel alone, so the fact that a man traveling alone was beaten and robbed was not so shocking. But then, two genuinely shocking things do happen in Jesus' story. The first shock is that the two people – the priest and the Levite – who were expected to help a man in desperate need came down the road, saw the man and did nothing. It would be like a police officer and a paramedic coming across a person thrown from a car accident, conscious yet bleeding profusely from a massive chest wound, and simply walking on by. We can hardly imagine such a thing in today's world because police and paramedics are professional rescue care-givers. That they would pass by would, indeed, be a shock. But an even greater shock was that the last person in the world we would count on for help is the one who, in fact, mercifully, bravely, generously rescues the injured man.

Having told the story, Jesus now says to the lawyer, "So, now you define the term neighbor. Who is the neighbor in this story?"

The lawyer either because he cannot bring himself to utter the word "Samaritan" or because he is so astonished that he has been caught in his own word trap of nuance, replies, "The one who showed mercy."

"Go and do likewise," said Jesus.

This is where the blindness of familiarity hinders us with this story. We like to see Jesus in action, out-debating a professional debater. "O, he's *good*..." we say – aligning ourselves with Jesus as he makes others think again when they think they've got everything all figured out. We like to think, even though it's the religious people in Jesus' story ignoring the injured man, that you and I, as religious people, would do better given similar circumstances. In fact, we're confident we'd do better: "Okay, Jesus, we *get* that parable. Move on, give us another."

Tom Long, preaching professor and author, points out though that there are at least two problems with thinking that all Jesus is saying in this story is, "All right, everyone go out and be just like that Good Samaritan. He cared for someone in need – regardless of race, creed, hatred, hair color or ritual uncleanness: I want you to imitate him. Go and do likewise."<sup>2</sup>

Long suggests that "if this were really Jesus' point, then he probably would have told the story differently." In other words, why put all this troubling Samaritan stuff in there at all? "What he could have said is there was a man in trouble, and three people passed by who could have helped. The first one didn't, neither did the second, but the third one did, so be like the third one and not like the first two." That would be a simple moral teaching.

That gives us a clue that if we distill Jesus' story down to an exemplary moral teaching we've missed something – just as surely as the priest and the Levite missed something as they travelled on that road to Jericho. Look again at the five verses of the parable of the Good Samaritan itself: Jesus elaborates on the actions of the Samaritan. More than half the parable is devoted to the Samaritan's actions – feeling pity, bandaging wounds, pouring wine and oil, lifting the man upon his own animal, caring for him at the inn and securing the innkeeper's hospitality – an overwhelming amount of description if the only point is to "go and do likewise."<sup>3</sup>

The second problem, Long suggests, is even more significant. "If Jesus' point is that he wants us to imitate the courageous compassion of the Good Samaritan, the sad fact is we can't do it."<sup>4</sup> O, we've heard plenty of news stories of people who heroically forget themselves and risk everything for a stranger, but that's just it – it's unusual. Almost none of us would do it. That's not a judgment, per se, it's simply not in our human nature to forget ourselves and those we love and risk everything for a stranger.

Some of you may have heard about a famous experiment conducted with seminary students many years ago. Researchers gathered the ministry students in a classroom and told them that each of them had an assignment. Their assignment was to video record a teaching lesson about the Parable of the Good Samaritan. But the recordings were going to be done in a building on the other side of campus, and because of the limited amount of recording time available, they needed to hurry to that building. Little did the students know, but along the

path to the other building, the researchers had planted an actor to play the part of a person in distress, slumped in an alley, coughing and suffering. They were on their way to do an assignment about the Good Samaritan, but what would happen if they encountered a person in need on their way to complete this assignment? Would they be Good Samaritans?

Well – no, in fact, they were not. Almost all of them hurried past the hurting person. One student even stepped over the man’s body as he hurried to teach about the Parable of the Good Samaritan!

We shouldn’t harshly judge these seminary students, as tempting as that may be, who couldn’t put into practice the Parable of the Good Samaritan – because neither can we. Long reminds us that simply knowing in our minds the right thing to do does not mean we can do it. To truly be a Good Samaritan takes a change of heart. And that’s what this parable is about – a change of heart.

How does this change of heart occur? Research has been done into the reasons why some people are generous and compassionate, while others are not.<sup>5</sup> It was found that for many compassionate people something had happened to them – someone had acted with compassion toward them, and this experience transformed their lives.

Take, for instance, Jack Casey, a rescue quad worker who had little reason to be a compassionate Good Samaritan. He grew up in a rough home, the child of an alcoholic, abusive father. But something happened to Jack when he was a young child that changed his life, changed his heart. He had to have surgery, and he was frightened. He remembers the surgical nurse standing beside him, looking him straight in the eye and saying, “Don’t worry. I’ll be here right bedside you no matter what happens.” When Jack woke up again, she was true to her word and still there.

Years later, Jack Casey, now a paramedic, was sent to the scene of a highway accident. A man was pinned upside down in his pickup truck, and as Jack was trying to get him out of the wreckage, gasoline was dripping down on both of them. The rescuers were using power tools to cut the wreckage, so one spark could have caused everything to go up in flames. The driver was frightened, crying out how scared he was of dying. Jack remembered what had happened to him long ago on the operating table, how that nurse had spoken tenderly to him, and stayed with him, and he said and did the same thing for the truck driver. “Look, don’t worry,” he said, “I’m right here with you, I’m not going anywhere.” When I said that, Jack remembered later, I was reminded of how that nurse had said the same thing and she never left me. Days later the rescued truck driver said to Jack, “You know, you were an idiot, the thing could have exploded and we’d both have been burned up!”

“I just couldn’t leave you,” Jack said.

Something had happened to Jack Casey that transformed him – that made him into one capable of being a Good Samaritan. I wonder, has anything like that ever happened to you?

Yes – Yes! I tell you! That’s the point of Jesus’ Parable of the Good Samaritan! What the lawyer discovered – and what we discover, too – is that we can’t stand

by the side of the road and figure out how to be good. It just doesn't work that way. There are way too many terms to define – who is my neighbor? How much do I do? How can I judge? What *do* I have to do to inherit eternal life? For all our religious teachings and virtues, we just can't be good Samaritans on our own. It has to be a gift – a gift given by God.

Can you see? We – you and I – are the person in the ditch, the one who lies helpless and bleeding beside the road, the one who needs to be rescued! And along comes a Good Samaritan – a Good Samaritan named Jesus – the one rejected, the one misunderstood, the one despised even by some, who comes to save us. He speaks tenderly to us, lifts us in his arms and takes us to the place of healing.

So, the question is not the one the lawyer asks, "What is the definition of neighbor?" Instead, the question is, *who has been neighbor to you?*

Jesus the Christ has been neighbor to you. The crucified, risen One has been neighbor to you. Have you felt his mercy make your own heart merciful? Then in your heart you will know what this means: "Go and do likewise."

Amen.

#### NOTES

1. R. Alan Culpepper,; "The Gospel of Luke," *The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume IX* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 227.
2. The Rev. Dr. Thomas G. Long, PCUSA, in his sermon "Meeting the Good Samaritan," preached July 15, 2007 for Day 1.
3. Patrick J. Wilson, in his article "Who We Are" in commentary on the coming lectionary texts, *Christian Century*, June 26, 2007, p. 19.
4. The Rev. Dr. Thomas G. Long, PCUSA, in his sermon "Meeting the Good Samaritan," preached July 15, 2007 for Day 1. As I read this sermon I was completely taken by this particular reading, having never come across it in any other resource. I use just two of his illustrations in greatly condensed form – the seminary student research project and the story of Jack Casey – and then paraphrase his stunning conclusion (indented text). His flow of words pulls us away from the usual direction we've come to expect when a sermon poses the question, "Has anything like that ever happened to you?" Instead of elaborating on people and circumstances that illustrate someone you know acting in a merciful way toward you, Long invites us to see *ourselves* as the victim, the one in need of rescuing. And before we can look around to see who that neighbor might be come to rescue us, he suggests that *Jesus* is the neighbor, the One who's come to rescue us. Only when we have experienced Jesus' mercy make our own hearts merciful to others will we truly know what it means to "Go, and do likewise." Wow.
5. Long uses the Jack Casey illustration from published research by Robert Wuthnow, a professor at Princeton University.