

## “There Goes the Neighborhood”

Woods Memorial Presbyterian Church

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*Scripture:* Luke 10:25-37; Rome 2:1-11

Before we consider today’s Scripture lessons, I like to share with you a little perception exercise. Normally this would be done with pairs or small groups, but it should work all right doing it as a whole as long as you close your eyes when I tell you. I’d like this half of the sanctuary to be group A, and this half to be group B. When I tell you, I’d like group B to close your eyes for a minute while group A looks at the screens. Ready? OK. Close your eyes, group B people. Now group A, look at the screens but don’t discuss what you see with your neighbor.<sup>1</sup> (*Figure 1 shown.*) OK, now let’s flip roles. Group A, now you close your eyes, please while Group B, looks at the screens. (*Figure 2 shown.*) Don’t say anything to your neighbor about what you see. OK? Great! Now everyone open your eyes and look at the new image on the screens. (*Figure 3 shown.*) Anyone in group A want to shout out what you see? How about group B? The odds are that if you were in group A, you see something like a man playing a saxophone in this picture; and if you were in group B, you see a woman’s face. In reality, the image you are looking at has both of the earlier images imbedded within it. It is designed to be ambiguous. But studies have shown, that if you show people one of the images, either the sax player or the woman’s face, before showing them the ambiguous one, you can predispose them to seeing one way or the other so solidly that they will have a hard time seeing the second image at all. A friend of mine was part of a project which did a similar experiment with white officials in South Africa in the 1980s, with dramatic results. All it took was exposing a group to a “preconditioning image” for 30 seconds for that group to be conditioned to see the ambiguous picture only one way. Even when participants from different groups tried to persuade their trusted colleagues of what they saw, they were unsuccessful. When the exercise was explained, one stunned official commented, “If I could be predisposed in thirty seconds to see an ambiguous picture only one way, . . . just think what thirty years of seeing the world one way has done to me.”<sup>2</sup>

This is worth keeping in mind as we consider today’s text because the story of the Good Samaritan is probably one of the most familiar texts from Scripture. People who have never read the Bible and know little about it still know this story; the term “good Samaritan” is even a codified term in our legal system. But the problem with all that familiarity is that most of us have learned to see and think of this story only one way for so many years that we no longer see all the lessons that this parable actually contains. Worse still, the primary way that many Christians have been predisposed to see this story is through the very kind of prejudicial lens which the story itself condemns. So just as we have given our eyes a little test this morning, I would like us to give our ears and hearts a little test now; but this time, with the help of the Holy Spirit, I’d like us to try to set aside our years of preconditioning in order to hear the story as the Jews Jesus first spoke to would have heard it.

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<sup>1</sup> Figures are found at the end of the sermon. They were reproduced from Covey, Stephen R., [The 8<sup>th</sup> Habit: From Effectiveness to Greatness](#) (New York: Free Press, 2004), 194, 196, 211.

<sup>2</sup> Fisher, Roger, Kopelman, Elizabeth, and Kupfer Schneider, Andrea, [Beyond Machiavelli: Tools for Coping with Conflict](#) (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1994), 23. This study followed a similar format to the exercise I used in worship, but different pictures. The ambiguous picture used in this study was imbedded with images of an old woman looking down and a young woman looking away into the distance.

Luke tells us that Jesus was prompted to offer the parable of the Good Samaritan in answer to a lawyer's question about eternal life. The lawyer asked Jesus, "What do I have to do to get it?" to which Jesus responded, "What does the law say?" "Love God with heart, mind, soul and strength and neighbor as self" the lawyer answered smartly. "That's right" Jesus says. "Go and do that." But this didn't satisfy the lawyer. "Ah, but who is my neighbor?" he pressed in classic lawyer fashion. So Jesus told him a little story: A man going from Jerusalem to Jericho gets robbed and badly mugged and is left half dead on the road. The first person to see him lying there is a priest; the second is a Levite, (which was a kind of Temple official.) Neither one of them stopped to help the man. Finally a third person, a Samaritan, sees the victim. He is so moved by the man's plight that he not only tends him by the side of the road, he also brings him to a place where he can heal, and tells the hotel manager to bill him for all the man's expenses. "Which one seemed to act like a neighbor to you?" Jesus asked the lawyer. "The one who showed mercy" he conceded unhappily. "Go and do likewise" says Jesus. End of story.

Now as modern Christians not 1<sup>st</sup> Century Jews, most of us have been preconditioned to hear in this story a couple of lessons. The first is explicit: you should never be too busy to help people in trouble, even if they seem unclean in some way. The second is implicit: the priest and Levite's behavior in this story, however inhumane it seems to us, was pretty classic and expected, given that the Jewish leaders in Jesus' day valued keeping the letter of the law more than offering compassion. The problem with this is that although it is certainly true that we should help people in trouble even when we're busy, and should always put compassion over legalism, there is nothing in this text to indicate that cleanliness laws were an issue either for Jesus or for the lawyer he was addressing. As Dr. Amy-Jill Levine, a highly esteemed professor of New Testament studies at Duke Divinity School, who also happens to be Jewish, has observed, the text states clearly that the priest and the Levite were headed down toward Jericho, not up toward the Temple in Jerusalem.<sup>3</sup> Thus it would not have mattered if they had been made ritually "unclean" by touching the man – they weren't headed to work. Furthermore, even if they had been on work errands, they would not have been made unclean according to the cleanliness law that Christians usually cite to explain why they didn't help the man, because that law is about touching a corpse, and the victim was not dead. In fact there were no laws that would have prevented the priest or the Levite from helping the man if he were truly in trouble, and were plenty of laws which would have made it their responsibility to do so, including the "love your neighbor" provision the lawyer cited from Leviticus. So this text cannot be about their warped love of Jewish legalism over grace. Jesus must have been trying to teach the lawyer about something else.

The key to recognizing that something, according to Levine, lies in Jesus' choice for the heroic helper in his story.<sup>4</sup> Samaritans were not just considered unclean by the Jews, they were considered evil enemies steeped in the sins of apostasy and idolatry. The Jews who heard him would have found it utterly shocking and profoundly offensive that Jesus cast the enemy as the hero in this story, especially because he set up the story using a rhetorical structure that made his Jewish audience anticipate a very different kind of ending. You see, they were used to hearing stories

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<sup>3</sup> Levine, Amy-Jill, The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 144- 129.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid* at 148.

which began “a priest, a Levite and a Jew...” because those were the three categories of faithfulness within Judaism at the time. The fact that Jesus set up the story this way, but then put a Samaritan in the place of the Jew in his story, therefore, was along the lines of his saying to us today: “A senator, a soldier and an al Qaeda terrorist” or “A doctor, a minister, and Osama Bin Laden.” The only thing more shocking than the fact that highly esteemed people from the first two categories did not respond with the appropriate help as expected, was that someone from the last category, who most definitely would not have been expected to show compassion, did. This was so unsettling and upsetting a thought that when Jesus asked the lawyer at the end, “So, who behaved like a neighbor to the beaten man?” the lawyer could not even make his lips frame the word “Samaritan.” All he could do was say, “The one who showed him mercy” and leave with a troubled heart and a bitter taste in his mouth.

If we take Levine’s perspective on the text seriously, then this parable’s lesson should be no less unsettling for us today than it was for the Jews who first heard it because the practice of categorizing and judging people as “Samaritans” is still alive and well in our culture. We don’t call our “enemies” by that term any more of course. Publicly we may call them Iraqis or Iranians or North Koreans, secretly in our hearts, we may think of them as Orthodox Jews or Muslims, communists or immigrants; heck, given the absurdly inflammatory and vitriolic language that is being spewed in the political arena these days, maybe some of us even call them liberal Democrats or conservative Republicans! But the point is that most people, including good people, consciously or unconsciously carry within themselves a bias or a prejudice which leads them to believe that certain kinds of people are well outside of the neighborhood God expects us to love. We not only feel morally justified in judging and condemning these people, we cannot imagine how anyone in this category could ever be considered a faithful servant of God, or be capable of showing compassion to us, their enemies. And so we write off the potential for anyone in this category to demonstrate mercy and faithfulness, not unlike the way that Christians have for years written off the faithfulness of all the priests and Levites in Jesus’ day thanks to this story, instead of considering the far more likely scenario that the two in this story were probably too afraid of being mugged themselves to risk their lives for the victim in the ditch, (as most of us also would have been).

If you want to know who your own personal Samaritan is, Levine says, there is an easy way to find out. Simply imagine yourself in the ditch in this story and then ask yourself, “Is there anyone, from any group, about whom [you’d] rather die than acknowledge, ‘She offered help’ or ‘He showed compassion?’ While you’re lying there, ask yourself also: “Is there any group whose members [you] imagine would rather die than help [you]?”<sup>5</sup> When we can answer these questions honestly, then we know who our own modern day Samaritans are. That’s an important start. But if we are willing to go this far in our discipleship, then Jesus’ lesson calls upon us to go still one step further and recognize as the lawyer was forced to do, that even when we think we know who our Samaritans are, the truth is that we really don’t know them at all. We cannot see into their hearts to know what they are capable of for good or evil. We don’t know how they would behave in any and all circumstances. The only one who knows them this well is God, who made them all in the divine image, and who sees them neither as enemies nor neighbors, but as human children as much in need of divine mercy as we are.

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* at 148-149.

Mercy. That's what the lawyer said the Samaritan showed the victim in the ditch. The term might not mean much to us now, but in his day he could not have used a more theologically- loaded word because in Hebrew, the same word which means mercy, *hesed*, usually describes the "steadfast love of the Lord" in the Hebrew Scriptures. So in effect, even though he couldn't bring himself to say the word "Samaritan," the lawyer was able to concede to Jesus that the Samaritan acted as an instrument of God's love in this story when he showed mercy to the man in the ditch, a Jew, his enemy. And because the lawyer in the story saw the Samaritan this way, others reading the story centuries later, including Saint Augustine, have seen even more; they have seen in the mercy of the Samaritan, the very face of Christ. Augustine believed that the Samaritan stood for Christ in this story, and that the parable was really an allegory about his ministry.

I don't know if Jesus intended the story to be about his own ministry in quite this way or not, but I do know that if we think of the Samaritan's mercy with Christ in mind, it makes even more sense why Jesus would tell the lawyer this parable. He was not giving him a lesson in statutory interpretation in response to the lawyer's second question about who counted as his neighbor; Jesus was giving the lawyer a much bigger lesson in God's love in answer to his first question, "What do I need to do to inherit eternal life?" The lawyer had demonstrated with that question that he wanted to know how to earn his own salvation. So Jesus reminded him, by means of the parable, that in the end the good news of the gospel is that we all are saved by God's mercy and love, not by our social status, ethnicity, morality or even good behavior. We are saved not by our own doing, but by the mercy of the one who sees each of us as capable of good and bad, and loves us anyway.

Imagine if we could all see one another as God does! Levine has written that if an Israeli Jew could only imagine the possibility of a Hamas leader pulling him out of the rubble after a rabbi and Jewish cabinet member passed him by, there might be more hope for peace in the Middle East.<sup>6</sup> The same could be said of so many other enemies. Think of all the tribal conflicts that have plagued Africa for instance. If Hutus could imagine needing to grab the hand of Tutsis in order to find healing, how that would change things. Likewise, if all Caucasians around the world could imagine truly needing people of color in order to survive, or if more Americans could imagine a time when they might say "thank God you're here" when approached by a kafiya-wearing Muslim...

If, if, if... We could spend all morning matching the necessary pairs of perceived enemies and imaging the peace our world could experience if only human being could see each other as God's children instead of less-than-human threats. But ultimately the parable of the Good Samaritan isn't about dreaming, it's about doing. Jesus wanted the lawyer to stop focusing so much on who should be residents of his neighborhood, and start focusing instead on how to behave in a neighborly fashion himself. We, like him, don't need a law book to tell us how a good neighbor behaves. We know this instinctively. We also know from our own experience of the grace of God in Jesus Christ, what it feels like to receive generous mercy and

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

compassionate healing despite who we are, where we are, and what we do or do not do. We don't really need to know anything else in order to obey God, keep the two great commandments the lawyer named and Jesus affirmed, and help heal the divisions in our world.

But if you're still not convinced, if you still find yourself looking at someone in a crowd or on the news and immediately thinking "enemy, enemy, enemy," instead of "How can I share God's mercy with that person?", then all you have to do is train yourself to see the face of Christ in your mind for 30 seconds before you look at anyone. The good news of the perception study I told you about is that it proves that if you do this, before you know it, the only thing you'll be able to see when you look in the eyes of a stranger is the familiar face of a neighbor; and not a soul on this earth will be able to persuade you otherwise. Thanks be to God. Amen.

1. The figures shown were as follows:



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3