
Church of the Beatitudes United Church of Christ

The Bad Samaritan

A Sermon by

Rev. Dr. Nancy Nelson Elsenheimer

Scripture: Luke 10:25-37

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I am a Samaritan. I come from a long line of Samaritans. My people come from the land of the rising sun, from the Mediterranean Sea to the places you now call Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, Syria, Jordan, Cyprus, Sinai and even parts of Iraq.

I am a Samaritan, descended from Abraham and Sarah and a people who remained in the land when others were taken off to Babylon in exile, ones who came back with an altered and amended religion.¹ My people, Samaritans, are the Keepers of the Law, given by Moses to Joshua on Mount Gerizim, the Mount of Blessing. I know you believe God should be worshipped in Jerusalem. Therein lies the rub.

There are about seventeen miles that separate us, but it might just as well be seven thousand miles. It is seventeen miles from Jerusalem to Jericho, from your Temple Mount to mine. Seventeen downhill miles, on a road that descends over 3,000 feet through wilderness badlands, twisting and turning through canyons and arroyos, pockmarked with caves. Seventeen miles, which if you make it safely through, brings you to my land, the fertile Jordanian plain and the oasis called Jericho.

The roads did not used to be dangerous. There was a time when we traveled freely back and forth. We traded our luscious dates and fruits and barley for your high country olives and wines and almonds. There was a time when people could look differently and speak differently and worship God differently, but you still treated one another with civility.

Not anymore it seems. I live in Jericho and you live in Jerusalem and a whole lot more than seventeen miles separates us. Let's face it: I have seen you, heard you say the word 'Samaritan' and I recognize the hate. The word is like spit that sizzles on the hot ground before an angry toe grinds it further down, crushing out any life or hope of relationship. You and I, who read the same Torah, who can recite the very same verses, "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." You and I who can cite chapter and verse. You can I who can give all the right answers. You and I who know that giving the right answers is not the same things as giving those words flesh.

"Answers weigh about as much as the breath it takes to expel them...(Answers) come out of the mouth and float away, leaving no footprints anywhere on the ground."² A right answer never picked up a man lying on the ground, waylaid on a twisting road.

A right answer never stopped to bandage a beaten and robbed man's wounds.

A right answer never poured out wine to cleanse the wounds, nor healing oil to bring relief.

A right answer never stooped to lift the nearly dead weight of the man onto an animal, to bring him to shelter.

A right answer never opened the purse strings to pay for this stranger's care.

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samaritan>

² <http://www.barbarabrowntaylor.com/newsletter374064.htm>

You see, don't you, that a right answer never feels the compassion, the yearning in the bowels, the gut level, God's word made flesh.

That bad Samaritan, isn't that what you consider him, did what no one else travelling on that road did: he came near the man. I might have been scared to come near. What if it were a trap, a rouse? What if there were more robbers lying in wait to attack me? And if he were dead and I touched him, then I would be unclean myself. It's safer not to come near. Once you come near, once you come into the half dead man's neighborhood, once you come near enough see him, near enough to hear him whisper you his name, near enough to hear his story, near enough to be moved with pity, near enough to show him mercy: once you come near, you create a neighbor. Not a seventeen mile apart neighbor. Rather a flesh and blood neighbor who draws out of you, out of me, out of all of us, our most natural, human, deep in our bowels, God-given mercy and compassion.

“From that time on and right down to the present, the question is, “Will I be a neighbor?” One cannot define one's neighbor; one can only be a neighbor.”³

I am a Samaritan, good or bad; the labels don't really fit anymore do they? Like it or not, I am your neighbor. Look around you and see the people: they are your neighbors. Close your eyes for just a second and see the faces of the world: they are your neighbors also. And you have heard the story more times than you can count, so you know what you must do: Come near.

Come near and be a neighbor. Come near to someone who needs love. Not the noun 'love', not love a subject to be discussed or an emotion to be felt or understood or discussed. Rather come near to someone who longs for the verb 'love', where compassion goes into action, where you get embedded in a story, where the story reveals the true nature of who you both are. Come near to a neighbor and you may just find your own true self: child of God, created in God's image, pronounced good in your creation. Coming near is God's specialty act. Coming near is what God has done for us. ⁴ Coming near is what God calls us to do for others.

The good news is that we will each, in our own ways, come near. No one of us will do it exactly the same way. Neither will we come near the same way twice. The roads we take will be different, and because we are willing to come near, and not merely pass by, the roads will be transformed also.

In this moment, these last few seconds of time away in a sanctuary, in God's temple, search for, find, feel, and claim your call to come near.

³ Eugene Peterson, Tell it Slant, Eerdmanns Publishing Co.,2008, p. 42.

<http://www.barbarabrowntaylor.com/newsletter374064.htm>

You will not find it in your head. You will not find it even in your heart. You will find it, my friends, like the Samaritan on the road, deep in the gut, the bowels, the seat of our mercy.

I am a Samaritan. I come from a long line of Samaritans. I have hope when we hear this story again, for the first time. You have heard it before. “Which of these three, the priest, the Levite, or the Samaritan, do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” The answer is obvious, “The one who showed him mercy.” The one called Jesus said, “Go and do likewise.”

Amen.