

Neighbor-Love

Romans 13:8-10 and Luke 10:15-37

Returning to a series on the parables of Jesus this spring. Before Lent we studied the parables of Matthew 13, which Jesus told toward the beginning of his ministry, when he was painting a picture of what the Kingdom of heaven is, or is like, using images such as seeds, and wheat and weeds and yeast and treasure in a field. It's this dynamic, starting small but growing & abundant reality, the value of which surpasses everything. For the next few weeks, we will look at parables from the middle to later part of Jesus' ministry that are told in response to questions, or accusations, or events that Jesus thought provided a teachable moment.

Before we dive into this morning's parable, a little reminder about why Jesus told parables: in a nutshell, to help hearers to think and see differently—especially about the Kingdom of God. And in doing so, to turn their minds upside down, or inside out, and challenge their assumptions about God, and faith. Therefore, in his parables he used startling and sometimes exaggerated aspects and outrageous characters to wake people up to God and God's ways. Parables communicate truth, but not in a heavy-handed or 'drinking from a firehose' sort of way (because Jesus knew that people would stop listening then), but in a way

that got them to think, and wonder, and ask questions. Or be questioned. This reminds me of an Emily Dickinson poem:

*Tell all the truth but tell it slant —
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise
As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind.*

This is what good art, poetry, storytelling does. They tell the truth, gradually—one piece of art at a time, one poem at a time, one story at a time. By “telling it slant,” or “in circuit,” they get at truth from a different perspective; in a way that gets at a topic from a new angle, and sometimes surprisingly. And not too much all at once, lest people become overwhelmed (blinded, as Emily Dickinson would say).

This was very much Jesus’ style in teaching about the Kingdom of God, and about God—one parable at a time, one illustration at a time. And this morning we’ll watch Jesus masterfully turn things around, and tell the truth slant, in this parable that we have come to know as the Good Samaritan.

Luke 10: 25-37

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the law? What

do you read there? "He 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. "And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live. "But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

Jesus 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. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So 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 compassion. He 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. The 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.' 'Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'"

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

Years ago, Ted Koppel was interviewing holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel on Nightline. Elie Wiesel kept answering Ted Koppel's questions with his own questions. We watched as Ted Koppel became a bit flustered by this, and in a moment of irritation he went off script and said, "You Jews always seem to answer a question by asking a question. Why do you do that?" Elie Wiesel replied: "Why not??"

In our account from Luke, Jesus answers a question by asking a question. With a powerful story in between, about neighboring. Neighboring is what this conversation, and the subsequent parable, is all about. As this lawyer hears Jesus reiterate the two greatest commandments (to love God with your whole self, and love your neighbor as yourself), he asks a boundary question in reply: "*And who is my neighbor?*" In other words, "Who am I *obligated* to love?" "Who do I **have** to love, and who do I **not** have to love?" He's asking about obligations and boundaries and borders: Who's on my *to-love* list, and who doesn't *have to be* on it.

Let's pause for a moment and ask ourselves: Who *is* my neighbor? In spite of this lawyer's motives (Luke tells us that he was trying to justify himself), that is a good question for us. Who is your neighbor? Do you have a mental list of who's on it and who isn't? Let's let that question sit and marinate in our consciousness for a moment.

The lawyer asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" In other words, who am I obligated to love? Where is the line, the border between neighbor and not-neighbor?

Let me tell you a story, Jesus replies. “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho.” That’s 18 miles, all downhill. Jerusalem is 2500 feet above sea level, and Jericho is 800 feet *below* sea level, near the Dead Sea. So over the course of about 18 miles, you go down some 3300 feet. To put it in Washington state terms, you go down a winding road from the top of Snoqualmie Pass to North Bend.

And that winding road (from J to J) was well-known as a perfect place for thieves and robbers. In fact, for centuries, it was feared as a place of frequent crimes, marauding bands of criminals, and violence. If you travelled that road, you only went in broad daylight, and only with another person or in a group.

But the man in the story is alone. And suddenly in this dangerous place, it happens. Out of nowhere, robbers come, take his things, beat him to unconsciousness, strip his clothes off, and disappear. And he is left, lying there by the side of the road, half dead. This is great drama; wonderful storytelling.

Kenneth Bailey is a Biblical scholar who lived in the Middle East for most of his career, taught at a University in Beirut, Lebanon, and has written helpful volumes about the culture there and how to interpret the Bible in light of that culture. He describes this area in the time of Jesus as an complex mix of ethnic & religious

communities, intermingled and complicated. And so, a traveler identified strangers on the road in one of two ways:

- By their *speech* - There were a dozen major languages, and any number of minor ones, but a person's dialect could be pretty easily identified. For example, in Matt.26 Peter is identified as a Galilean. Because when Peter denies knowing Christ, someone who hears him speaking says, "we can tell by your accent" that you were one of his Galilean followers. People were identified by their speech; and second:
- By their *clothing* - The difference between Jewish and non-Jewish dress was instantly identifiable, even down to differences from village to village.

But this man who fell to robbers in the parable was, "stripped, beaten, and left half-dead." It's a brilliant aspect of the story, because it begs the question: Who is he? Where is he from? He can't talk, nor does he have clothes that identify him. So, is he one of us? Is he one of 'them'? Is he safe? *Who is he??* The answer is: He is a human being, in need. He is any person in need.

That is his most basic identity. A human being—any person, or every person—in need. Now, the rest of the story is about how two priests ignore him and each one walks by on the other side—probably for religious reasons because touching

a potentially dead body would render them ritually unclean—and how finally a Samaritan, a person despised by ethnically Jewish religious folks, stops to help the guy by doing some basic things that will help him recover. And Jesus then issues the command to go and do likewise. Be a good Samaritan. Be a good neighbor; act in neighborly ways by helping those in need.

And did you notice that Jesus turns the lawyer's question around? The lawyer asks, "Who is my neighbor?" After the parable Jesus asks, "Who *acted as* neighbor?" It's a brilliant reframing of the issue. It isn't about boundaries of who is in or out, but about considering *what kind of person* we each are called to be.

I want us to back up and take a moment to ponder the mind and heart of the Samaritan, in particular the human connection that he obviously felt, and how this relates to us and our world right now.

I'd like us to dwell on these three short phrases in verse 33: he came near; he saw him; he was moved with compassion. He came near. He saw him. He was moved with compassion. Before he *did* anything, he stopped himself to approach this person. Then he took the time to see and understand his condition. And as a result, he was moved in his gut. The word "compassion" in Greek is, literally, "guts" or "intestines"—the Greek word is pronounced "splagna" which kind of

sounds like guts; intestines, entrails; you get the picture! He was moved, inwardly, with compassion.

It is so important for us not to miss this part of the story. Jesus didn't have the Samaritan go swiftly from walking to helping to going on his way. This little verse, verse 33, tells us that there was something that happened internally for the Samaritan that caused him to realize a human connection. He came near; he *saw* him; he was moved in his gut. And btw, there are two words that mean "to see" in Greek: one refers to basic eyesight; the other to observing, and understanding, and looking more deeply into something or someone. Like when someone clarifies something for you, and you say, "Oh, I see." That's the word that's used here. The Samaritan SAW him; not just with his eyesight but with his awareness, with understanding. And it moved him in his gut.

The priests cared primarily about religious purity and borders and differences as they passed along on the other side of the road. However, the Samaritan took time to fully take in this person's condition, and let himself be moved, Jesus tells us, therefore putting the human connection and solidarity *first; as primary*—perhaps, even as an *expression* of his religion or spirituality or whatever we want to call it.

Because Samaritans were religious too, just as much as the Jews were. The word “religion” literally means to “re-ligament.” It’s a beautiful word and a lovely image, because it signifies spiritual surgery, if you will, reconnecting human relationship with God, and human relationships one to another. So this parable is easily read as an example of *bad religion* at work and *good religion* at work. Bad religion being the act of differentiating and distancing and separating, (perhaps de-ligamenting), and good religion as an act of drawing near, connecting, and joining. Healing. The true purpose of religion. As Paul puts it in Romans 13, that love is the fulfilling of the law (of religion).

By telling the story this way, with these characters, and by asking the zinger question at the end, Jesus erases issues of difference and who is in or out, and invites his hearers and followers to BE a certain type of person who really sees others as persons, regardless of who they are, or where they have come from, or what their condition is.

To practice true religion. Real neighbor-love.

And for there to be real neighbor-love, we have to allow the suffering of others to affect us. Real human solidarity needs to be felt. That’s the meaning of the word “compassion” in English: to “suffer with” (co-passio) – to allow

someone else's pain to affect *and* connect us—to move us beyond our personal opinions and circumstances and our reflexive views of others—our borders if you will—and see, not differences but commonalities.

And we have to allow these feelings, in our gut, and invite God's Spirit to teach us how to reach out with our hearts, as well as our minds, in understanding. It's interesting, this whole encounter begins with the question: what must I do to inherit eternal life? And Jesus answers by reiterating the greatest command: love God. And how? With all your heart... soul... strength... and mind. Did you notice, the mind came last? Love—of God and neighbor—begins with heart, and soul, and strength. Mind picks up the rear. I think that's instructive because we reflexively go to our minds first, and we begin to process and evaluate, and analyze. All good skills, but if I'm hearing Jesus right, he's saying, love begins with heart, with soul.

We may not always be able to physically or materially do what the good Samaritan did in helping someone, but we can each take steps toward *becoming* the neighbor that Jesus teaches us to become by taking time to respond with heart; to learn about people around us, and feel the human connection, the way the Samaritan felt this compassion, this human connection.

What better way for Christians to engage the commandment to love their neighbor as themselves than to learn what those neighbors hold dear, and what makes them who they are.

And sometimes our seeing, our listening, our compassion, *is* the help that people need. Especially these days! People may not be physically beaten, stripped, and left half dead along the side of a road, but a lot of people are *feeling* beaten and maybe half dead inwardly. So I am convinced that the first and best way to love our neighbors these days involves listening and understanding.

Christian author James Finley gave a series of talks earlier this year, titled: “Becoming a healing presence in a traumatized world.” I love that phrase, and that sense of who God is calling his people to be in today’s world. A healing presence. A religious presence, in the best and truest sense of that word.

One last takeaway from the story: By using these particular characters—an everyperson victim, two priests, and a Samaritan—Jesus has jarred his listeners; he has startled them awake, into an awareness of how *God* sees people.

Because, Jews and Samaritans at that time hated each other. There is a lot of history and backstory there and you can read about it by doing a simple search online. And, there are encounters in the gospel where Jesus talks with Samaritan

people in public and affirms them and helps them, which leads to his being harassed and hated by the religious leaders. For example, when the Pharisees wanted to insult Jesus and accuse him, in John 8:48, they said, "*Aren't we right in saying you're a Samaritan and **therefore** you have a demon?*" Jews considered Samaritans accursed and unclean. Demon possessed!

Therefore, Jesus' listeners—his Jewish audience—would have been not only startled but offended that a Samaritan is made the hero of the story, and that they are told to go, then, and be like a Samaritan. This would be like Jesus, in Israel *today*, telling a story about the good Palestinian, or the good Iranian. Or during the Civil War, appearing in the north and telling the story of the good Confederate. Or, in the south, the good Yankee.

Jesus is creating a religious and cultural earthquake with this story. We are supposed to note the shocking element. And part of the shock here is that God doesn't have an insider-outsider mentality, or a hierarchy of who is more important or worthy. God doesn't draw lines like that, or sort people like that.

The shock is that God's love is for anyone and everyone, **and**, that *anyone can be used by God* to do good, and... that even a despised outsider—people thought of as heartless and less than human—can have the heart of compassion

and see other human beings as human beings and practice true religion. In a way, Jesus has humanized the Samaritan. Even as the Samaritan humanized the person who was left by the side of the road.

And the shock is that Jesus didn't see Samaritans as despised outsiders the way he was supposed to. He didn't abide by tribal code and norms. He saw human beings as human beings. Period. And at the end of the story when he asks the lawyer "Who was a neighbor to that person?" what he is really asking is, "Who was seeing clearly here?"

Again, this time in our world and in our society is providing an opportunity for God's people to see, really see, our fellow human beings and allow ourselves to be moved with compassion. Because... *that's how Jesus sees people*. In the gospel accounts, whether it was a Roman centurion, or a Syro-Phoenician woman, a Samaritan leper, or a wealthy tax collector, whether a 12-year-old girl, or a hostile enemy, there was no one who was dismissed from Jesus' heart of compassion. He *saw* them. And that's how he sees you, and that's how he sees your near-door neighbor, and your neighbor where you shop and socialize, and your neighbors across the world.

Could there be a better way for us to practice *our* religion, and to become a healing presence, than to see, not differences but commonalities, and express our love and compassion, along with Jesus, and thus become true neighbors?

Jesu, Jesu, fill us with your love