

Sunday, June 19, 2022

A Sacrificial Community

(Series: "Stories of Jesus")

(Message Two)

(Luke 10:25-37)

Scripture

²⁵On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

²⁶"What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"

²⁷He answered, "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 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

²⁸"You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."

²⁹But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

³⁰In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. ³²So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. ³⁴He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'

³⁶"Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

³⁷The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

Message

The first time I preached on this parable I was a seminary student.

On the way to church for the evening service – we had stayed the day by a family of the church – a car in front of us made a left turn into the church parking lot - right in front of a motorcyclist. The motorcyclist T-boned the

passenger side of the car and went flying over the car and landed on the other side – in the middle of the road.

He was not wearing a helmet or leather; it was not a pretty sight. Traffic was stopped, emergency personnel summoned, and my wife, a nurse, went to assist.

When it came time for church to start, a couple of elders came to summon me in to pray and then lead worship. I complied. (I was a seminarian, and they would be evaluating me.)

The message was from **Luke 10: 25-37** – the parable of the Good Samaritan – and I felt like the priest in the story Jesus told.

There is more than one way to enter the story. There is more than one viewpoint one can take.

Readers approach a parable at different points in life, in different frames of mind, with different expectations and tuned to different needs and nuances. We're influenced by our language, culture, history, economics, politics, experience. Thus, a rape victim will read this parable quite differently than the person who heard the scream down the street and decided to ignore it. If we have ever been stranded at the side of the road, we'll view it differently than if we never have.

Parables are all designed to invite us into the story. We need to enter the story and become part of the action, or it will never be more than simply theory or basic theology.

This parable offers a number of options and perspectives: the victim, the priest and Levite, the Samaritan, and the (original) audience of listeners.

Setup

Our text begins with a lawyer approaching Jesus with a **question. Luke tells us** his purpose was to trap or test Jesus into saying something to invalidate the law of Moses which could then be used to discredit him. So he has an agenda.

Question One. The lawyer asks, "*What must I do to inherit **eternal life**?*" His initial question is already flawed: "*What can anyone do to inherit anything?*" Inheritance, by definition, is a gift from one family member to another. If you're born or adopted into family, you can inherit. Inheritance is not payment for services rendered; the lawyer knows this.

Question Two. Jesus doesn't answer the lawyer's question, but instead asks him, "*What is written in the **law** (Torah)?*"

The lawyer answers Jesus' (Question Two). He offers a similar summary of what Jesus gave: "Love **God** (Deut. 6:4-6) and love your **neighbor**." (Leviticus 19:18) (Perhaps he had even heard Jesus say it!)

Jesus then answers his first question, Question One: "You have answered right; do this and you will **live**." That is, just follow your own advice. Live up to these standards and you will inherit eternal life. I.e., just consistently practice unqualified love for God and for your neighbor.

Is Jesus saying salvation can be earned? No. But anyone who can meet those standards doesn't need grace. But no one, except Jesus, can keep those standards. (cf. **Romans 7:13-20**)

Then the lawyer, now caught in his own trap, tries to **justify himself (note: to *be justified* means "to be saved" and "to be saved" means to "inherit eternal life"). He is saying, "I just need a few definitions...and I'll be fine!"**

Question Three. So the lawyer now says, "I know to love God is to keep the law (I got part handled!), but who is my **neighbor**? When I know that, I'll be good!"

He fully expects Jesus to offer him a list he can manage. He expects Jesus to say something like "your fellow Jews who keep the law in a precise fashion – like you do - are your neighbor."

He already "*knows*" Gentiles are not considered neighbors, and everyone knows God hates Samaritans, so they don't qualify. He knows **Leviticus 19:18** implies neighbors are "*anyone of your **own people***." So he is not imagining the answer is anything beyond "*my family*" or maybe, "*the stranger in my town*."

Question Four. After Jesus tells this parable, he asks the most important question: "Which of these three **became** the neighbor?" The lawyer, in answering the question, says, "The one who showed **mercy** on him" because he can't quite say the word *Samaritan*.

Jesus' final answer now to his third question is, "Go and **continue doing likewise**."

Scenes

There are **seven** action-packed scenes in this parable – seven being the perfect number. The drama moves quickly from one scene to the next. It is a finely crafted story by an expert storyteller.

The **climax** is in the **middle**; the **last** three scenes are linked to the **first** three in an inverted order. The parallels are strong and clear.

In scene one, the robbers take the man's possessions; in the final scene (seven), the Samaritan pays for the man out of his own resources because the man has nothing.

In scene two, the priest fails to transport the victim to safety; in scene six, the Samaritan transports him at a significant risk.

In scene three, the Levite could have bound up his wounds, but didn't; in the fifth scene, the Samaritan compensates for his failure by caring for him.

The center scene, scene four, focuses on the Samaritan's **sacrificial heart**.

Scene One: "A person going from Jerusalem to Jericho fell among **robbers." (Luke 10:30)**

The listener's first reaction is, "*The guy should know better than walk that dangerous seventeen-mile stretch – known for its brutal attacks – all by himself.*"

Robbers in the Middle East are known to beat their victims only if they resist. This man apparently made that mistake, or these robbers were extra ruthless. The result was he was stripped, beaten and left unconscious for dead. The listener and reader are left to assume he is a Jew.

Scene Two: "By coincidence, a priest...saw him, and **passed to the other side." (Luke 10:31)**

When Jesus describes how the priest and Levite walk by, the listener is not surprised. There was, in Jesus' day, almost an anti-clerical sentiment in the day that expected as much. They were Sadducees. The priests and Levites, however, would have been deeply offended: "*Why is Jesus picking on us?*"

Priests were part of a hereditary guild and were known to be wealthy – often at the worshipper's expense - and every Middle Easterner listening would assume the priest would likely be riding. History tells us many priests lived in Jericho, and as a person of means, he would not be hiking the seventeen miles. He could have easily transported the wounded man.

In those days, like today, people are often identified by their **clothes**, language, and their **accent**. Scholars spoke Hebrew; peasants, Aramaic; Greeks, Greek; nomads, Arabic; government officials, Latin; those living in the coastal areas, Phoenician; and many living by the Sea of Galilee spoke Syriac.

But this priest had a problem. The beaten man has no identifying features. If he were a fellow Jew, the **oral** law would have required him to help; but if he was a Gentile, he would have no responsibility (under law) to do anything.

If the victim were a Jew and the priest tried to help and he approached the man and he was dead or he died while he was trying to help him, he would by the **written** law become ceremonially **unclean**. (cf. **Leviticus 21:1**) He would have to return to Jerusalem for a week of cleansing during which he (and his

entire family) would be banned from eating from people's tithes and he would not be able to assist anyone. As a priest he was required to follow the written law with literal exactitude, that is, to the letter of the law.

The priest likely did not have easy time deciding, but he finally decided his **ceremonial purity** was more important than helping this man.

Scene Three: "A Levite came...and when he saw him **passed to the other side..." (Luke 10:32)** Levites functioned in the Temple as assistants to the priests.

This Levite likely knew a priest was ahead of him. Perhaps he was even his assistant. And the priest, as the higher ranking official, would always set the precedent. So, if the priest passed by, he could also pass by with an easy conscience.

A Levite should never **upstage** a priest; that would suggest he thought he was better than a priest. So how could he enter Jericho with a wounded man that the priest – in his best understanding of the law – had opted to ignore? That would be an insult to the priest and perhaps an end to his job.

Compassion always reaches **beyond** the **requirements** of any law and protocol; compassion is not, cannot be, prescribed in the code books and social etiquette.

Scene Four: "A Samaritan, traveling...saw him, and had **compassion on him." (Luke 10:33)**

If a story begins with a bishop, then a priest, we'd expect a deacon to come along. After the priest and Levite walk by, we expect a Jewish layman to walk by. Just as delegations of priests and Levites went up to Jerusalem and returned to Jericho after their allotted round of temple duties, so a delegation of Israelite laymen also went up to serve with the priests and Levites.

So the listener understands the first and second passersby and anticipates the third, and then to their great shock and amazement, Jesus says the third man is a hated **Samaritan**. The "hero" of this story is not a Jewish layman but a detested outsider!

It would have been far more acceptable if this were a story about a "good" Jew helping a "wounded" Samaritan; it is quite different to tell a story about a "good" Samaritan who helps out a wounded Jew who had been ignored by a priest and Levite.

The presence of a Samaritan, a social and religious outcast, changes everything. The Samaritans claimed to be descendants from the Hebrew patriarchs (**John 4:12**) but the Jews contested their claim saying they were simply "racial and religious half-breeds," descendants of inter-marriage

between Israelites and the Median and Persian captives after Samaria fell in 721 B.C.

Although the Samaritans recognized the Torah as the Word of God and meticulously observed its laws, it didn't change the Jewish contempt for them. Jews **refused** to have any dealings with them - publicly cursing them in the synagogues and praying daily that they "*might not be partakers of eternal life.*"

In the previous chapter, James and John, wanted to call down fire from heaven on them for refusing to provide them hospitality. (**Luke 9:54**)

They would not permit a Samaritan to touch them, much less minister to them. They believed God would protect them and "*bind up their wounds*" (**Hosea 6:12**) and couldn't imagine God would use a Samaritan (for anything).

So this story of Jesus begs the question for the listener: "*Who among you would permit themselves to be **served** by a **Samaritan**?*" The anticipated answer is: "*Only those who aren't in a **position** to **resist** such aid.*" That is, only those who are truly victims, fully at the mercy of the Samaritan.

Only those who understand this can understand what the **Kingdom of God** is about. Only those who become like the victim on the Jericho Road are able to understand what it means to receive God's mercy. In the kingdom of God mercy comes only to those who have no right to expect it and who cannot resist when it comes. Mercy always comes from a place where one does not and cannot expect it.

The **love** that God demands we show our neighbor ("*Love...your neighbor as yourself*") does not arise out of our human or religious nature or by imitating the Samaritan or even Jesus; it is not something we can **create** at all.

We are each the anonymous victim God has made the recipient of his mercy, just like the nameless traveler on the road to Jericho was made the recipient of the Samaritan's mercy.

We learn what the love of God is by experiencing his love and mercy in our helplessness – as Paul experienced it on the road to Damascus. Only the totally **helpless** can receive and experience **mercy**.

Scene Five: "He **went to him, **bound** up his wounds, **pouring** on oil and wine." (Luke 10:34a)**

First aid must be administered before the wounded can be moved. The Samaritan is using all his available resources (oil, wine, a cloth wrapping, riding animal, time, energy, money) to care for the wounded man. In the first century, this was a common way to treat wounds.

Kenneth Bailey suggests that "*Love that gives money as charity or alms, is free from seeking praise or honor, is willing to suffer and endure suffering and loss is*

extraordinarily rare.” The Samaritan is paying a **high price** to assist this wounded man he does not know, is not like him, and will likely not be able to repay him.

In doing so, the Samaritan becomes the “**saving agent**” in the story breaking in from the outside, binding up the person’s wounds, and pouring oil and wine on them. He becomes the symbol for **Jesus**.

Scene Six: “*He **put** him on his donkey, **led** him to the inn, and **took** care of him.*” (Luke 10:34b)

The Samaritan now risks his life transporting this wounded man to a Jewish inn in a Jewish village. There are no inns in the wilderness. A Samaritan would not be safe in a Jewish town with a wounded Jew over the back of his riding animal. At best, he would have been expected to “unload” the wounded man and quickly disappear. Instead, he stays and ministers at the risk of his own life. It always costs something to help someone.

Scene Seven: “*The next day, he gave two denarii to the manager: “**Take care** of him and whatever more you spend, on my return, I will repay you.”*” (Luke 10:35)

Two denarii would have covered the food and lodging for almost two weeks; now having paid the bill, he still had to escape town. Was there a crowd waiting for him outside the inn? Was he **beaten** or killed? Such things were not **uncommon**.

The storyteller doesn’t say. We don’t know. The story is open ended. We do know that no good deed goes unpunished.

Why would this Samaritan do this? For a Jew? In Jesus’ day, people could be sold as slaves if they couldn’t pay their bills; a lodger in a commercial inn who could not pay risked being sold into slavery to pay his bill. This wounded man has nothing – not even clothes. The Samaritan pledged to settle the final bill lest his rescue be in vain. Without this **extraordinary effort** the Samaritan might as well have left the poor man to **die** in the wilderness.

Summary

The Samaritan extends a costly demonstration of unexpected **love to a helpless man; Jesus demonstrates the life-changing power of costly love seen on his **cross**. Again, the Kingdom takes on the character of its King.**

The dialogue between Jesus and the lawyer now concludes. Jesus asks, “*Which of the three do you think proved neighbor to the man?*”

The lawyer’s neighbor question is never really answered; Jesus answers a larger question: “*To whom must I be or **become** a neighbor?*” The answer: **Anyone** in **need**. In this parable, the neighbor is the Samaritan, not the

wounded man. The Samaritan becomes the neighbor to the wounded man at great cost; there is always a cost to being a neighbor.

The lawyer has now been given a **standard** he cannot meet. He now realizes he cannot **earn** eternal life, because it requires doing what is beyond his capacity and **capability**. He was challenged to ask, *"To whom must I be a neighbor?" "Whom must I love?"*

This parable answers: *"Your neighbor is anyone in need, regardless of language, religion, ethnicity, politics – even your enemy."*

Your neighbor, the person alongside the road, is the woman robbed of her husband by another woman; the child robbed of her mother by forced overtime at work; the child robbed of safety and security by school shootings, the business owner robbed of their income by a pandemic; a child robbed of their summer by a broken leg; the teenager robbed of her virginity by a high school date; a person robbed of health by heart disease; the woman robbed of her reputation by a malicious gossip. There are plenty of neighbors robbed alongside the roads we travel.

Your neighbor may be unknown, unfriendly, unlovely, costly, and unappreciative. But they are still your neighbor. See the picture beginning to form? Why? Because it is Christ-like. The Kingdom looks like its King (Jesus). The Good Samaritan looks a lot like Jesus.

This parable is one of Scripture's finest expressions of costly compassion and caring; the demands of this vision are endless.

That Sunday night years ago, the church would have been wise to leave the building and "worship" by caring for the victim, for those who witnessed it, and for the emergency personnel. That would have been a picture of the Kingdom.

Jesus provides a **model for us to emulate that we will never **perfect**.** Scripture says, *"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners (enemies), Christ died for us."* **(Romans 5:8)**

Jesus breaks in from the **outside**, binding up our eternal **wounds**, and pours out his own **blood** to heal us. That is what the **Kingdom** is like. This is what our **King** does. *Go and **continue doing** likewise.*

Prayer:

Father, we are all wounded and hurting from the pain and struggles of this life and in need of your care, your love, and your compassion. Thank you for breaking into our world in Jesus, for binding up our eternal wounds, and for pouring out your own blood to heal us.

Father, open our eyes to the plight of those laying alongside the roads of life desperately in our care and attention. Assist us in becoming their neighbor, in assisting them in their need, and in being willing to pay the price – as Jesus did for us. Use us in the building of your Kingdom.

In the name of Jesus our Teacher and Rabbi, Amen.

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Covenant CRC
7171 Willard Ave. SE
Grand Rapids, MI 49548