

## “Neighbors”

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Based upon Rom. 15:1-6; Luke 10:25-37

Have you heard the joke about the man who fell into a pit and couldn't get himself out? An empath came by and said, “I feel for you down in that pit.” A fundamentalist came by and said, “Only bad people fall into pits.” A therapist came by and said, “The pit is all in your mind.” A pessimist came by and said, “You'll never get out of a pit like that.” An optimist came by and said, “It could be worse.” A policeman came by and said, “You are trespassing in that pit.” A real estate agent came by and said, “I can sell you that pit.” A news reporter came by and said, “Can I get an exclusive on what it feels like to be in that pit?” Then Jesus came by, reached out his hand, and lifted the man out of the pit.<sup>1</sup> There are lots of different versions of this story. Basically all you have to do is pick a category of person and then plug in the stereotype associated with it as the punch line. You could have the passersby be environmentalists, engineers, Republicans, Democrats, feminists, Muslims, immigrants (legal or illegal), and I suspect that you can think of what the punch lines would be for those categories just as quickly as I can.

But what if you were the passerby looking down at the man? Then the punch line would have to be on you. What stereotype do you think others might have about you? What if you were the one in the pit? Then would any punch line be funny? Probably not. But that is where we find ourselves today as we are confronted by the oh-so-familiar and challenging parable of the Good Samaritan. “Which one of these do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” Jesus asked the lawyer whose questions had prompted him to tell the story. Did you notice that the mugged man is the only one not identified by category in this parable, so that we can conveniently see ourselves in his place? Did you notice also that Jesus did not answer the lawyer's implicit question, “Who do I have to love?” directly? Instead he answered it indirectly by asking his own question, “What does loving a neighbor look like?” The Samaritan was the one who loved his neighbor as God would have him do; the Samaritan was the one who both recognized that the man on the road was his neighbor, and did what the Lord, and the Law which the lawyer had just cited, commanded. The Samaritan loved the man as he loved himself.

But we all know that right? We all know that it's the Samaritan who gets it right not the priest or the Levite who passed by before him. We know this so well that Christians now stereotype Samaritans as good and the others as bad. “Those bad religious folk!” many commentaries say one way or the other, “too busy to stop, or too holier-than-thou to risk becoming ritually unclean,” (even though ritual uncleanliness was not really an issue because they were headed to Jericho, not Jerusalem). We all know so well that the Good Samaritan is the good guy that in our country we have enacted “Good Samaritan” laws to encourage people to behave like he did, and to protect people who do if the victims they help turn out to be litigious. We know the end of this parable so well that now probably more church goers think of themselves as good Samaritans, helpers who care, than think of themselves as the two who didn't, even though the

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from a version of this joke found in “Animating Illustrations” accompanying “*What is a Good Samaritan?*” Homiletics Online, 7-16-95, retrieved 10-10-17 from <http://www.homileticsonline.com/subscriber>, under Luke 10:25-37.

opposite is more likely. (If the priest and the Levite did not stop because they were afraid of being mugged and robbed themselves, which is most likely the case, then we are just as paralyzed and distracted by fear today as they were.)

We think we know this parable well. But what many people today still do not fully appreciate is that if we think of ourselves as good Samaritans, then the punch line is on us, not just because more often than not we all behave more like the priest or Levite, but also because to put yourself in the shoes of a Samaritan in the Bible is to cast yourself in the role of enemy. It is not to call yourself a good guy or gal; it is to call yourself someone perceived to be an apostate, idolatrous person, the last person on earth any faithful or good person would ever expect to do what God wants human beings to do. “Good Samaritan” to the Jews of Jesus’ day was an oxymoron. By definition, Samaritans were not good; Jews were.

It’s hard for us, all these centuries later, to appreciate how much the Jews loathed the Samaritans and vice versa. But back then, the animosity between the two peoples, who were neighbors in the most literal geographic sense whether or not they recognized it in the spiritual sense, was ancient and ingrained. The hostility between them went back about three hundred years to a time in the 8<sup>th</sup> Century B.C.E, well before the famous Babylonian exile, when another fierce empire from the east, the Assyrian Empire, swept in and conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel. The Assyrians were not like the Babylonians, in that they did not take everyone away into exile. They deported some people, the powerful people mostly. But they allowed many others to stay in the land. Over time, those left in occupied territory did something that the Jews in the Southern Kingdom of Judah could never forgive. They became assimilated into the ways of the empire. They intermarried with the Assyrians, had families, and built new lives. All the time they did this, they also believed that they were still faithful to Yahweh. They still studied the Torah. They still worshiped and offered sacrifices. They couldn’t go all the way to Jerusalem after being conquered, but they worshiped Yahweh just the same on one of their own mountains, Mt. Gerizim.

If you’ve ever read the popular book [The Nightingale](#),<sup>2</sup> about two sisters who respond very differently to the Nazi occupation of France during World War II, then you will understand that the Samaritans never thought of themselves as selling out to the enemy. The Samaritans were like the older sister with the child in the book, who made a life with a Nazi because she did not feel that she had any other choice. But the Jews were like the young sister, who joined the Resistance because she would rather die than adapt. When you read the book, you feel great sympathy for both sisters and their choices. But in the real life squabbles between the Jews and Samaritans, there was no such sympathy, let alone empathy for their positions. So the people who were once all kin by virtue of being “children of Yahweh,” became like strangers, and then eventually enemies.

Now mind you all of this took place three hundred years before Jesus and the lawyer had their little conversation. But tribal loyalties and biases are easily passed from generation to generation. By Jesus’ day, both the Jews and the Samaritans believed that they were faithful keepers of the original Law, and both hated each other. We see a classic example of this two

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<sup>2</sup> See Hannah, Kristen, [The Nightingale](#) (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2015).

chapters earlier in *Luke*, when some Samaritans reject Jesus because his “face was set toward Jerusalem,” and his disciples respond by asking if they can command fire to come down and consume them all (9:51-56). Time had not softened the divisions between the peoples. If anything, it had hardened them.

Keeping that in mind, let’s think again about Jesus’ answer to the lawyer. He had correctly summarized the Law: that we are to love God above all and neighbor as self. But when the lawyer then pressed Jesus to define who a “neighbor” was, thereby demonstrating that he did not truly understand the Law even though he could quote it, Jesus couldn’t resist setting him up. He did so by telling him a story that started out sounding like a joke. “*A priest, a rabbi, and a minister walk into a bar. And the bartender says, “Is this a joke?”*”

No seriously, Jesus didn’t say that, but he did say something similar. He intentionally invited the lawyer to think about people by category and stereotype. A man is attacked and left for dead. Then a priest walks by and doesn’t help him. Then a Levite walks by and doesn’t help him. Then... at this point the lawyer was just as primed as we are when we hear bar jokes for the next category. Jesus had just named two categories of good, faithful, law-abiding Jews: priests and Levites. If he followed the rhetoric of the day, the last category should have been a lawyer (which would have made the lawyer feel very proud), a Pharisee, or maybe just a regular Jew. But Jesus didn’t do the expected. While the lawyer was waiting to be painted as the good guy in the parable, Jesus plugged in the bad guy, a Samaritan. Today the equivalent set up for the story might be, “A judge, a general, and an Isis terrorist,” or “A doctor, a lawyer, and a convicted felon.” Suddenly this was no joke. It was a shocking and offensive lesson.

In our day, because the term Samaritan has lost its shock value, the parable has also lost most of its punch. It has become a lesson about putting compassion over punctuality or the spirit of the Law over the letter of the Law. But if we put the shock back in, recognizing how Jews and Samaritans viewed each other, then the parable becomes the ultimate lesson for our time because it is about stereotyping and categorizing others, which people are doing now more than ever. The parable challenges us to examine our stereotypes and assumptions about others and about ourselves in three important ways. First, the parable asks us to consider who our “Samaritans” are. Who are the people we so associate with selling out to cultural evil, or living contrary to God’s way that we cannot possibly imagine them being cast in the role of compassionate hero or the faithful servant of God’s will? Many people in our country would probably say Muslims, unfortunately. Some might name people in the opposing political party. Some might name others of a different ethnic group, race, or sexual orientation. Dr. Amy-Jill Levine, a professor of New Testament studies at Duke Divinity School and a Jew, says that your Samaritan is either whoever you’d rather die than acknowledge “He or she offered help or compassion when it was needed,” or “Whoever you’d rather die in the ditch than allow to help you.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, whichever category of people most gives you the hives, according to this parable, they are not just potential good guys in God’s eyes, they are also your neighbors. That means you are called to love them as you love yourself.

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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), 144-49.

Second, this parable asks us to recognize that even though we think of ourselves as good (and I think most of us do because we strive very hard to be good), we are all someone else's Samaritans. The good guys in the story—the priest and the Levite—they did nothing! They risked tippy toeing along the edge of a precipice rather than help the man. The lawyer and we might be shocked by this, but the Samaritans of Jesus' day probably would not have been because they had very little respect for the Jews. So in addition to turning the stereotype of the bad guy upside down, Jesus turns the stereotype of the good guy upside down. They don't help despite their social status, their influence, their supposedly deep faith.

These days it isn't hard to imagine who in the world sees us as the priest and the Levite. Think of how the Syrian refugees view the United States, or how the people in Puerto Rico think of mainlanders; or since the victim was right in front of the faces of those who passed him by, think closer to home: the people in Flint, Michigan, the Native American tribes in the Dakotas, the people living in Sandtown, the children stuck in foster care. This is where that punch line on yourself that you thought of in the beginning of my sermon comes in. If these people were writing the joke and named us as passersby, what do you think they would say that we would say instead of just helping the man out?

If thinking about that makes you uncomfortable and defensive, and want to say, "I'm not like that. I do help. I do give generously. I do show compassion," then you have recognized the third point, and most important lesson in this parable. Stereotypes are wrong all the time. There are good Samaritans. There are bad priests. Therefore, when it comes to keeping God's commandments, we cannot rely upon human stereotypes. The only category which is accurate to apply to any human being is the category of "neighbor" because that is what we all are in God's eyes. The neighborly thing to do, therefore, the good thing to do, is to show compassion and mercy to each other regardless of the other categories we are in. The neighborly thing is for us to do what Jesus did, to reach in and pull whoever is in a pit out. We seem to have the ability to do this during times of great crisis. In Houston, people crossed color lines and economic lines to rescue each other in boats. In Las Vegas, many people grabbed whoever was near them to drag them to safety, or loaded their cars with bleeding strangers in need of help. But we have had so many crises lately, that adrenaline-fueled bonding is now being replaced by cortisol-fueled division. We can't help everyone, so many people are moving back into self-protective mode, turning neighbors back into "thems" in their minds.

Citing the wisdom of the Desert Fathers, Barbara Brown Taylor wrote in her book, An Altar in the World, that "the hardest spiritual work in the world is to love the neighbor as yourself—to encounter another human being not as someone you can use, change, fix, help, save, enroll, convince or control, but simply as someone who can spring you from the prison of yourself, if you will allow it. All you have to do is recognize another you 'out there'—your other self in the world—for whom you may care as instinctively as you care for yourself."<sup>4</sup> Her statement is as counter-intuitive as Jesus' parable in some ways. Most of the time we do not think of ourselves as imprisoned by our individuality. But her point is that whether we recognize it or not we are. We

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<sup>4</sup> Taylor, Barbara Brown, An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith (New York: HarperCollins Pub., 2009), 93.

were made in the image of God, which means that we were made for relational living. As God is a triune, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we are in a triune relationship with God and neighbor. We are our best selves when we are connected by love to both. We are our worst selves when we are disconnected by pride or fear from either. Thus whether we think of ourselves as in prison or a pit, the way out Jesus gives us is by fulfilling his commands to love God with all our heart and our neighbor as ourselves. Doing so takes us out of ourselves and into the relationships we need to thrive.

“Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor,” Paul wrote, “For Christ did not please himself;...”(Rom. 15:2). God’s command to love our neighbors as we love ourselves, recognizing that all people on earth are our neighbors, is probably the hardest one in the Bible. “It can be as frightening as it is liberating,” Taylor concedes. “[But] it may be the only real spiritual discipline there is.”<sup>5</sup> So in these divided and troubled times, may Paul’s prayer for the Roman Christians be our prayer as well: “May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant us to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together we may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 15:5). Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*