

## Who is My Neighbor?

-Sometimes it is the most familiar stories that are hardest to understand.

For us the word Samaritan has positive connotations. Because of Jesus' parable, we can almost only think of the *Good Samaritan*. This last week Jo, Emma, Austin and I got certified for CPR and First Aid, and our instructor mentioned how Good Samaritan laws protect someone trying to help save a person's life from lawsuits. There are recognizable charitable organizations like Samaritan Medical Center, Samaritan Hospice and Samaritan's Purse Disaster Relief.

But in the days of Jesus, Jewish references to the Samaritan people were not positive. *What do you know about the Samaritans?*

Do you remember that there was a time that the land of Israel was divided into two kingdoms? Judah was the southern kingdom, where Jerusalem lies. The northern kingdom lay north of Judah up to the Galilee. And it was called Samaria. In 721BC, the Northern Kingdom was destroyed by the Assyrian Empire in what was understood biblically as God's judgment on their idolatry. Most of the people were deported, never to return, but those who were left behind or who escaped to the hills over time were intermarried with Gentiles. You recall that the Southern Kingdom was destroyed and carried away to Babylon in 586BC. When the exiles from Judah returned from exile to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem, they encountered Samaritans in the north, now having rejected the old Jewish priesthood and traditions, having claimed their own city for a Temple, having truncated Hebrew Scriptures, having become convinced that they were the true heirs of Abraham and Moses, the true keepers of the true faith. And to the Jews, the Samaritans were half-breed idolators who defiled the true religion. They were more revolting than Gentiles.

By the time of Jesus the hatred between Jews and Samaritans had gone on for hundreds of years. It's reflected in the animosity between Israel and Palestine today. Both claim to be the true descendants of Abraham. Both claim to be rightful possessors of the land. Most Israelis do not travel south from the Sea of Galilee to Jerusalem through the Palestinian West Bank (Samaria) at risk of violence. For their safety Jews in Jesus day headed north from Jerusalem would first descend east down to Jericho in the Jordan valley, then turn north to follow the river up to Galilee. The point is that Jews avoided Samaria and Samaritans. They avoided Samaritans by using the Jerusalem/Jericho road that Jesus references in his parable.

Sounds like something still going on in our world, no? And not just in the Middle East.

Who even now do we think of as bitter competitors over the mantle to be true guardians of Christian faith or national identity?

-The Gospel reading for today is from Luke 10.25-37. The Chosen has helped us see and hold on to the tension that lies behind so many biblical passages. See if you can hear the tension that lies beneath this exchange between two ways of understanding what it means to be God's people.

<sup>25</sup> An expert in the law (expert in Hebrew or Old Testament Scriptures) stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” <sup>26</sup> Jesus said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” <sup>27</sup> 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.” <sup>28</sup> And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

Let’s pause there for a second.

We’re told the expert is out to *test* Jesus. You know how someone can ask an innocent-sounding question to try to get someone else to expose how out of step they are with the crowd in order to vilify them?

He asks: What must I do to inherit eternal life? A better translation of ‘eternal life’ is probably ‘the life of the age to come.’ What must I do to enter into God’s age to come? By the time of Jesus, Jews divided history into the Present Age and the Age to Come. The Age to Come would be when the LORD would finally act decisively to judge evil, rescue Israel, and create a new world of justice and peace. So he’s not asking What must a person do to go to heaven when they die? But: What do I have to do and be to pass through God’s judgment and endure into the coming age on earth as it is in heaven? What’s the way to enduring life in God’s kingdom? Where the realm of God and the realm of earth overlap and God’s will is done, God’s shalom made fully manifest?

And Jesus wisely answers his question with a question: Well, what is written in our Scriptures? How would you answer that question? What do you read there?

His answer? Love God with everything. Love your neighbor as much as yourself. Exactly how Jesus answers himself when he’s asked about the greatest commandments, the heart of the Scriptures, what life is all about.

And so Jesus *affirms* this man who’s challenged him. ‘You know the answer. Do this and you will live.’ And so the man went away satisfied to enter into a quiet Lenten journey spiritual renewal, setting aside what was getting in the way of his putting God first, so that he might love God with everything, and attend to his neighbor.

No. He did not. What he *wanted* was to surface the scandal of Jesus’ views in public. The way he saw the road to life mattered to him. He saw Jesus as a corrupter of the truth and a danger to the People of God. And he wanted to expose Jesus’ heresy.

<sup>29</sup> But wanting to justify himself, the legal expert asked Jesus, “And *who* is my neighbor?”

And there it was. Dig down on this question and we will see how it divides people of faith. If not on the surface, in practice. In what we want for our children. In what we want for our church. In what we want for our country. In what we want.

‘Who is my neighbor?’ would be a strong question to ponder for the season of Lent.

For the legal expert, God is the God of *Israel*. For him neighbors are *Jewish*.

For Jesus, God is the God of grace for all people. For him neighbors are Jews and Gentiles, that is Jews and non-Jews. And who are the people who are either Jewish or non-Jewish? Every human person.

<sup>29</sup> [So] wanting to vindicate himself, the Bible scholar asked Jesus, “And *who* is my neighbor?”  
<sup>30</sup> Jesus replied, Once upon a time, “a man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and took off, leaving him half dead. <sup>31</sup> Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. <sup>32</sup> So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. <sup>33</sup> But a Samaritan while traveling came upon him, and when he saw him he was moved with compassion. <sup>34</sup> He went to him and bandaged his wounds, treating them with oil and wine. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. <sup>35</sup> The next day he took out two [days’ wages], gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him, and when I come back I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ <sup>36</sup> Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” <sup>37</sup> He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

-Let’s look at the story. *Who’s in the story Jesus tells?* [man robbed, Priest, Levite, Samaritan – Priest and Levite would be folks from same tribe, priests descendants of Aaron go to Jerusalem on rotation to help with sacrifices; Levites help with other non-sacrificial liturgical tasks – religious elites steeped in the Scriptures; Samaritans recognized neither their validity nor their authority]

OK. So there’s a guy stripped, beaten and left for dead by thieves, though of course those passing might have no idea who he was and what happened to him. First the priest then the Levite see him on their side of the road, walk to the other side, and pass by.

*Why do they pass by?*

Maybe preserving ritual purity. Maybe they don’t think they can touch someone actually dead lest they be unclean for their work in the Temple (though they are going the opposite way of their work in the Temple).

Maybe too important. Maybe they are going about things they consider too big to pause for things they consider this small?

Maybe busy. Maybe they have so many responsibilities that there’s no time left for this basic human responsibility?

Maybe no one watching. And they are used to showing sacrificial kindness only for the applause of others.

Maybe afraid to help the wrong person. What if he's a Samaritan? What if he basically deserves this? What if my failure to spurn him has the appearance of endorsing his false beliefs?

In any case, the religious people pass by. In Jesus's story, the People of God most knowledgeable about their calling fail to help.

But when the Samaritan comes upon the (likely Jewish) wounded traveler, he's the one that has compassion, that touches what may be repulsive wounds, that rearranges his plans, that spends significant money, that follows up.

- 'Who is my neighbor?' Jesus doesn't answer the question directly does he? Hold on to this piece of the story. Instead of answering the question: 'Who is my neighbor?' Jesus asks his own question: 'Which of these three *was a neighbor* to the man who was assaulted?' That is, Jesus kindly invalidates the man's attempt to *limit* who's included to his own ethnicity, nationality, and faith. Jesus won't let him establish a bare minimum of who's to be included in the centerpiece of God's calling. He asks which of the three showed *mercy*. And so he reframes the exchange from 'Whom do I have to love?' to 'How am I growing in neighborly mercy?'

And get this. Here's what's so brilliant. This is *exactly* what the lawyer was trying to catch Jesus saying in public. That his urgent vision for the justice and peace of God's kingdom meant seeking intimate fellowship with the wrong people, even these hated, godless, half-breed enemies. But in the end, Jesus doesn't have to say it. The man gets to hear *himself* admit it out loud.

- Who exactly is our neighbor, Church? Well. Do you see how easy it is to wear the badge of Christian faith while at the very same time believing in your bones (without seeing the contradiction) that it's generosity and goodness are limited to the people I love? Lent is a time for self-reflection. Do you see how easy it is to believe (even unconsciously) that Jesus just goes too far in making mercy for someone on the side of the road the measure of Life?

Something to consider. Will we use the God-given revelation of love and grace as a marker of personal identity and security not unlike national chauvinism? A warmth of pride that extends to our own people and up to our own borders? Or will we see that revelation of God in Christ as a challenge to extend love and grace to the whole world?

- It gives me chills that Jesus shares this parable on his own way to Jerusalem. That he tells this story about a stretch of road he would all-too-soon cover. And that his own answer to the question 'Who's my neighbor?' is finally answered by the urgent mercy of the cross: 'Father forgive them (all) for they know not what they do.'

'Who is your neighbor?' No apprentice of Jesus can remain content watching a person made in God's image lying half-dead in the road. Let's pray...