

Sunday August 16, 2020
 Lesson 11: Who Is My Neighbor?
 Scripture: Luke 10: 25-37

Context:

We go to the Gospel of Luke to examine another story of Jesus interacting with another Samaritan. This time though, Jesus uses the Samaritan as a teaching example in one of his parables. Parables were often stories with everyday allusions and people with a heavenly meaning. Today's lesson examines how Jesus uses an everyday person to teach us who are neighbors might be.

The scripture lesson begins with a lawyer innocuously asking what one must do to inherit eternal life. In some ways, the setup tells us something deeper is going on. The lawyer already knows the answers to his questions and Jesus replies in the affirmative; they were of one accord.¹ However the lawyer wants to push it forward and when he does, he reveals the true unspoken question. To ask: "Who is my neighbor?" implies selectivity, some are neighbors and some are not, and therefore, "Who are the ones I am to love?"² We cannot know the full motivation of the lawyer, yet it seems there is a trap being laid for Jesus. Clearly there are some people who are not to be deemed as neighbors, and therefore, the lawyer is given an excuse to hate or not love them.

Jesus takes the opportunity to tell a story. The parable is perhaps one of the most well known in Christian tradition. There is a man robbed and beaten, left for the dead on the road. There are three who pass by him: a priest, a Levite, and then a Samaritan. The usual suspects, the priest and Levite, for whatever reason do not stop to help. The Samaritan does stop to help though, even going as far as taking the man to an inn and paying for his recovery.

For modern readers, one might wonder what was so wrong with being helped by someone who was just a little different. The ancient audience knew what was wrong with the Samaritan being the hero. The Jews and the Samaritans were the ancient Hatfields and McCoys. Samaritans were descendants of a mixed population occupying the land post Assyrian conquest in 722 B.C.E.³ They opposed the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem and had their own worshipping place at Mount Gerizim.⁴ Those two facts do not include

¹ Craddock, Fred B. "Luke," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for First and Second Kings*, (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009), 150.

² Ibid., 150.

³ Ibid., 150.

⁴ Ibid., 150.

all the fighting which had been going on between the groups for centuries.

For Jesus to portray the Samaritan as hero was to step on toes. He was asking the lawyer and audience to think of who was their worst enemy and to imagine that person as the one giving care. There's a potential reason the lawyer could not name Samaritan as the one who showed care. It would be to admit his "worst enemy" was his neighbor and he was to love and emulate him.

Application

The focus of this story has often been upon the compassion given by the Samaritan. It is indeed a rousing story of showing love to those you may not even know and suffering alongside in pain. There is a reason we see projects and hospitals with the name "Samaritan" somewhere in the title.

Yet to simply relegate the story to an application of compassion misses the point of the parable, especially considering the first set of questions the lawyers asks Jesus. Jesus is making a profound point about who is our neighbor and how loving our neighbor is not relegated to just the people we like. Our neighbor means all people, including those we deem as our enemies. Jesus is humanizing those we deem as enemy so we are forced to deal with our assumptions and prejudices.

I will never forget having a conversation with a clergy colleague about how people responded to those they disagreed with about things. The colleague reflected on how people use statements like "they/them" or "those people" or "that group" to indicate they don't have to love someone. "Those people" are ruining this country. "That group" has no place here. "They" are against us. If we can label someone as representative of a whole group of people, it gets us off the hook for not having to love a person.

We all do it from time to time if we are honest with ourselves. We mark people as undesirable and not worthy of our love if they fit into a certain category or box. It becomes very easy to justify our hatred for when something is done and we want to put our rage and angst somewhere.

Currently, our culture has a lot of struggles when it comes to the question: "who is my neighbor?" Even before the pandemic, we have seen cracks appear between people. As a whole, our national discourse when we disagree has become atrocious.

Yet if we read this parable in a modern lens, understanding the ancient context, we all might have our toes stepped on. Perhaps we might need to imagine who is our enemy and then put ourselves in the place of the wounded man. The story comes alive for us.

Imagine you're stranded on the side of the road and who pulls up but a white woman with Daughters of the Confederacy and Trump stickers all over her car. She's the only one to stop and she's going to make sure she gets you help. You don't agree with her supporting the Confederacy or who she voted for, but she's your neighbor and for goodness sake, she's the one who rules the roost in her local church. She loves Jesus just as much as you.

Or maybe you've fallen outside and you can't get up. Many people pass by, believing you're there to set a trap or begging for sympathy. The one to stop is a young African-American man. He has on a Black Lives Matter t-shirt, is blasting Drake in his

car as he pulls up, and you suspect he's probably going to vote as a Democrat in the next election. Yet he's the one to come over and help you out, even staying with you until the paramedics arrive.

You can fill in the blank of who your "enemy" is and there you have your example. As Jesus told this parable, he was redefining what it means: "to love your neighbor." We are challenged to see our neighbor as those who we may not want to love or see as part of our community. And yet we hear from our Lord, this is the neighbor God has given us. May we see the love and grace in them we see in our Lord, even if it means we have to question the labels we have given them.

How have you heard this parable taught before? Who have you labeled as "your enemy?" Why is it easier not to love those we consider our enemies? Who would you rather die or suffer than receive help from? What does it mean to be a good neighbor to those who are different than us, those who are our "sworn enemies?"

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