

Sunday between 10<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> July [15]

Luke 10:25-37

Today we are once again left to consider the parable of the Good Samaritan. This is such a familiar story. One researcher found in a survey that 49% of the people interviewed said they would be able to tell the story of the Good Samaritan if asked to do so, 45% said they would not be able to, and 6% were unsure whether they could tell it or not. Among those who attended religious services every week, the proportion that thought they could tell the story rose to 69% percent.

But whether or not one could accurately retell this parable, the concept of the "Good Samaritan" is familiar enough to everyone. We name hospitals, churches, and institutions in his honour. Most people know a 'Good Samaritan' when they see one...Mother Teresa, the fire brigade and even that anonymous person that simply stops to change a flat tyre for you or helps a blind person cross the street, yes we have all met one or have heard of one even if we can't relate the full details of the story.

In the story of the Good Samaritan we are immediately introduced to a lawyer, he poses a question to Jesus as a "test" - "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus answers this question with one of His own. "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" The answer comes back, "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 neighbour as yourself." Good answer. And Jesus agrees. But the lawyer not satisfied with that, still wishes to be clear, so he asks another question "And who is my neighbour?" In other words, "OK, Jesus, I understand I am supposed to CARE, but what are the limits of my caring? When can I stop caring?" And here Jesus tells His famous story.

The first person to which we are introduced is the poor traveller. He had taken the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, which was notoriously dangerous. It descended nearly 3,300 feet in 17 miles, running through narrow passes at points. The terrain offered easy hiding for the bandits who terrorized travellers. This unfortunate man had been stripped, beaten, and left for dead. Jesus' audience that day knew how easily it could happen and I would suspect that we Jesus audience today could easily identify by glancing quickly through the newspapers or watching the news on television.

Suddenly who should come along but a priest? If anyone could be expected to stop and help it would be a priest. But wait. The priest does not come over to help; he is passes by on the other side. No reason is given. Perhaps it was fear. Those who beat the man in the ditch might be lying in wait to beat him as well. Have you ever seen how people respond after an ugly accident by simply passing by for fear of becoming involved? Next there came a Levite...an "assistant" priest. As the text has it, "he came to the place and saw him, [and] passed by on the other side." Another hero!

Enter character number three - a Samaritan. The GOOD Samaritan! Nowhere in the Bible will we find the words "Good" and "Samaritan" next to each other. For those people who first heard this story, the phrase "Good Samaritan" would have been an oxymoron, it was not possible for Samaritans to be good according to the Jews.

Why such depth of feeling? The hostility between Jews and Samaritans was hundreds of years old. It went back to the time of the division of the nation into the Northern and Southern kingdoms - Samaria came to be identified with the North and Judea with the South. Following the Northern Kingdom's fall to Assyria in 721 BC, exiles from many nations settled in Samaria, creating something of a melting pot, no longer was it purely Jewish. Move forward a hundred years or so. Now it is the turn of the Southern Kingdom to fall - this time the conqueror was Babylon, and, as was the custom of the day, the people were carried off into exile to prevent any uprisings in the occupied territory. The few Jews left in Samaria were

considered no threat in that regard, so they were left in Palestine. Seventy years passed, and the exiles were allowed to return. The Samaritans were ready to welcome them back, but the returnees would have none of it - Samaritans had intermarried with gentiles making them unclean. The Samaritans had perverted the race and they had also perverted the religion. They looked to Mt. Gerizim in their own land as the place to worship God, not Jerusalem. They interpreted the Torah differently than the southern Jews.

By the time of Jesus, the animosity toward Samaritans was so great that some Jews would go miles out of their way to avoid even walking on Samaritan soil. So why does Jesus need a Samaritan in his story? After all, if Jesus were just trying to say we should help the helpless, supply the needs of the needy, he could have talked about the first and second men who passed by and the third one who stopped and cared for the half-dead guy in the ditch. If Jesus were also making a gibe against religious establishment, we would expect the third man to be a lay person - an ordinary Israelite - in contrast to the professional clergy. If Jesus were illustrating the need to love our enemies, then the man in the ditch would have been a Samaritan who is cared for by a loving Israelite. Of course, that is not the way the story goes.

While we consider why a Samaritan let's go back to the story. The Samaritan sees the man, but instead of distancing himself just as the priest and the Levite had earlier, he comes closer. As the text has it, "when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, bought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii [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.'" Not an insignificant amount, not lavish either, but enough to do the job.

The story is over. Jesus has responded to the lawyer's question about the limits of neighbourliness with his story and now turns the question back to the lawyer: "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" And the answer, "The one who showed him mercy." Amazing, isn't it? The concept of a good Samaritan is so distasteful that the lawyer cannot bring himself to even speak the name.

Perhaps the answer to that question we raised earlier, "Why a Samaritan?" is that Jesus did not want his hearers to identify with this generous caregiver. As attractive is the behaviour of this man, as much of a helper/hero as he obviously was, that would be the temptation. But no good Jew could do that. They would not want to be like the Priest or Levite either, so the only character left with which to identify would be the man in the ditch.

Now Jesus concludes, "Go and do likewise." What? Be the man in the ditch? Perhaps that is not so far-fetched as we might think. We never hear if this poor victim recovers, but our assumption is that he does. That being the case, what would the effect have been on him that a Samaritan had rescued him? One would presume that it would forever change his view of Samaritans. For that matter, one would presume that it would forever change his view of the world's victims. There would be less callousness, less inclination to lay blame for getting into such a fix in the first place, less temptation to "pass by on the other side."

If Jesus' story had gone on any longer, it might tell us that this poor fellow, from that day forward, became a better neighbour to the rest of his world than he would have ever dreamed possible. Have you ever wondered about the rest of the story? Did he remember the cruelty of the robbers and shape his life with that memory? Or did he remember the nameless generosity of the Samaritan and shape his life with that debt?

Here is the example to us, who would change us were we to suddenly become indebted to them, who is the Samaritan for us? The one type person we struggle to love as God calls us to love, completely and without prejudice. That is worthy of prayer today, in our world full of division, who is it that we are failing to love and how shall we learn to love them, for that is

the answer to the lawyer's question and that is the challenge for all who follow Jesus. How can we better love God, and our neighbour as ourselves?