

“Taking a Second Look at the Good Samaritan”

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Place: Lakewood UMC

Text: Luke 10:25-37

Occasion: Short Stories by Jesus, series

Theme: Good Samaritan, prejudice, hatred, compassion

The term “Good Samaritan” is used so often in common speech that we often take it for granted. We assume it means someone who will stop and show compassion on another person in need. But if parables are meant to surprise and to shock the listener, our common understanding of this parable doesn’t give anyone much of a jolt. Does it shock you?

What happens when we strip away 2,000 years of usually gentle and well-intended advice to be a do-gooder, and we hear the parable as a first-century short story spoken by a Jew to other Jews? There are a few surprises.

The parable opens up with a lawyer asking Jesus a question. Lawyers have had a bad reputation for centuries, and Luke was no fan of them either. This one in particular, we are told, was not asking Jesus a question because he was a genuine spiritual seeker.

Rather, he had impure motives. He asked the question in order to test Jesus. By testing Jesus, the lawyer takes the Devil’s role, for it was Satan who had “tested” Jesus in the wilderness. Jesus shuts the Devil up by telling him, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” (Luke 4:12)

Rabbi Amy-Jill Levine tells us the lawyer asks the wrong question. “What must I *do*” to inherit eternal life.” That verb tense suggests a single, limited action. The lawyer is thinking of something to check off his to-do list: recite a prayer, offer a sacrifice, drop off a box of macaroni for a food drive or drop a twenty in the collection plate.

Instead, he should be thinking of living a new life of righteousness. Eternal life is a life-style, not a reward for doing something. Rabbi Levine enlightens us by sharing that Jews at the time already believed in the resurrection. The only group who didn't were the Sadducees, and that is what made them "sad, you see." Ok, bad religious humor!

Jesus does not directly answer his question. Instead, he uses what is sometimes called the "Socratic method," Rabbi Levine thinks the Jews invented it, or at least perfected it. In typical Jewish fashion, Jesus answers a question with a question. "In the Law, what is written? How do you read?"

By turning the question back on the lawyer, Jesus evades the trick. He may also be appealing to the lawyer's ego: "Surely, sir, you know the answer. After all, you are the trained professional." The lawyer can read, unlike the majority of people in ancient times.

The lawyer's answer is familiar to both Christians and to Jews. "You will love the Lord your God with all of your heart and soul and strength and mind, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love of God is the ground of one's being and the guide for one's life.

And this love for God has to be manifested; it has to be made visible. To love is to act. We show our love for God by loving our neighbor. The lawyer was right to combine Deuteronomy 6 and Leviticus 19, but he was not original. The two had already been combined in Jewish thought and teaching. We Christians become quite arrogant when we assume Jesus invented these commandments. They were already well known and well appreciated by the Jewish community.

Jesus answered the lawyer, saying, "Rightly you have answered. Do this and you will live." The lawyer got the right answer; good for him.

However, he did not quite get the question right. So Jesus changes it for him. The lawyer asked about “eternal life,” but Jesus reframes it by telling him it’s not about the hereafter; it’s about right here, right now. “Do this, and you will live.” The point is, live this way now, and don’t be so focused on the next life.

Were the lawyer wise, he would have thanked Jesus and gone off to show his love. But he’s a lawyer in Luke’s Gospel. Instead, he proves his wrong intentions towards Jesus by posing another, even more inappropriate question. “But he, wanting to justify himself, said to Jesus, and ‘who is my neighbor?’”

His question, on a technical level, is not a bad one. There is a difference between the legal rights of a citizen versus a non-citizen. The lawyer’s question has merit. One needs to know who are my neighbors and who are not, according to the law. They may have different rights.

But for our parable, the lawyer’s question is misguided. To ask “who is my neighbor” is a polite way of asking, “Who is NOT my neighbor?” or “Who does not deserve my love?” or “Whose lack of food or shelter can I ignore?” or “Whom can I hate?” The answer Jesus gives is that everyone deserves love – local or alien, Jews or gentiles, terrorist or rapist, everyone.

Love cannot be restricted. In the book of Leviticus, the “stranger,” or the “resident alien,” or today we might say the immigrant, is also deserving of respect and compassion. Leviticus 19 says “When an alien resides in your land, you shall not oppress the alien.” The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizens among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.” (19:33-34)

Jesus makes the point that there is none who is undeserving of love. Jewish Law required the people to care for citizens and strangers alike who

are living in their country. It did not require them to love their enemy across the border. Rabbi Levine notes that only Jesus insists on loving ones enemies. For Jesus there are no barriers or borders or walls to love.

Jesus then tells the familiar parable of the Good Samaritan. It begins with a man who was robbed and beaten and left for dead. Three people pass by and only one of them stops to help.

Christians for years have made the priest and Levite the bad guys in this story, implying that Jews don't care about human suffering. They would get upset over eating a ham sandwich but wouldn't care about a violent physical attack. That's wrong. The anti-Jewish polemic in Luke is astonishing when someone begins to point it out to you.

Back to the half-dead man, but still alive, naked but badly wounded. Listeners, identifying with him, can only hope that rescue will come. Because they identify with his pain and suffering, their question - and so our questions - is – “Who will help *me*?”

Rather than seeing the Jews as being unsympathetic to human suffering, we need to clarify the art of Jewish story telling which Jesus uses. Using a literary device known as the rule of three, Jesus sets us up for a surprise.

If I were to say to you, “Father, Son and _____.” How would you finish the sentence? “Holy Spirit,” correct. If I were to say “Larry, Moe and _____,” how would you finish the sentence? “Curley,” correct. And when Jesus said to his Jewish audience, “A priest and a Levite, they would have assumed *an Israelite* would have been the third person to pass by, a person just like themselves.

But that's not who stops to help, is it? It was a hated Samaritan, a group of Hebrew people, descendants of Abraham and Moses, but who

worshiped at Shechem instead of Jerusalem. But over the centuries, a deep hatred developed between these two groups of people. This was not who they expected as the hero of the story. In modern terms, this would be like going from Larry and Moe to Osama bin Laden.

The priest and the Levite are not bad people because they are Jewish, but rather they are simply ordinary people who do what is all too ordinary, they fail to act when they should. The shock of this story is who the hero turns out to be – someone they hated.

They may have thought, “I’d rather die than to acknowledge someone from that group saved me.” To do so would be to see the humanity in someone they had been taught to despise. “I do not want to acknowledge that a rapist has a human face, or that a murderer might be the one to rescue me.”

You see, to Jesus’ Jewish audience, the idea of a “good Samaritan” would make no more sense than the idea of a good rapist or a good murderer.” So put yourself in the ditch, bloodied and beaten, your money stolen and you’re lying there half-naked and half dead. Who would you NOT want to save you?

An illegal immigrant? A Muslim of any kind? What if you were an Israeli, would you want a Palestinian to save you? Or if you were black would you want someone from the Klan to help you, or vice versa?

Jesus then asks the lawyer, “Which of these proved to be the neighbor?” The lawyer couldn’t even say the hated name “Samaritan.” He could only say, “The one doing mercy for him.” Jesus tells him to go and do likewise. Yes, the invitation is to do good to those who are different from us.

But can we finally see the humanity in our enemy and acknowledge their potential to do good? Will we be able to care for our enemies, who are

also our neighbors? Will we be able to bind up their wounds rather than blow up their cities? Can we begin to put ourselves in the shoes of people fleeing other countries where there is so much violence they put their children in caravans and send them to a foreign country, hoping someone would help them?

Can we stop leaving people by the side of the road and walking by on the other side, because they're not like us, or we don't like their country of origin? The biblical text – and a concern for humanity's future – tells us we must. God help us. Amen.

This sermon borrows heavily from *Short Stories by Jesus* by Amy-Jill Levine. Harper Collins Publishing: NY, NY, 2014, "The Good Samaritan," pp. 77-115.