

### THE UNEXPECTED NEIGHBOR

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he said, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' He said to him, 'What is written in the law? What do you read there?' 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.' And he said to him, 'You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.'

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?' Jesus replied, 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and 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, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend." Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'

#### **Luke 10:25-37**

Last weekend I started rereading the Harry Potter series thinking it would be fun to read them again before the new book came out; when I started however, my husband bet me I couldn't finish them all before the next book was released. Not one to refuse bets that involve reading novels, especially ones I was going to read anyway, I found myself with two weeks to read three thousand page. It only took a few pages, however, for the story to sweep me into a world of its own creating.

When I finally put the book down a few hours later, I was reminded of the powerful sway stories can hold over us. I started the book anxious about having to preach the next day, aware of the laundry that still needed to be done and wondering what was going to come out of the fridge for dinner, but a few pages in and my nerves had fallen away, the laundry slipped from my mind and dinner seemed like a distant eventuality compared to the world of magic and wizardry that was emerging in front of my very eyes.

The ability to sweep me away into another world entirely, allowing my mind and senses to be transported to new and different places, has always been my favorite part of novels and stories and one of the many reasons I pick them up compulsively, even when there are other things to be done.

Yet, when I read the story for this morning's sermon, the story of the good Samaritan, I was distinctly not transported into any other world. It is, granted, a fair bit shorter than the novels I

normally pick up, but even after the first few sentences my eyes glazed over and my mind finished the story before my eyes could even glance over the rest of the words.

It's not that I'm *that* Bible literate, nor even that I know this story so well, for when I finally forced myself to actually read the entire story I came across details I had forgotten and turns of phrase I hadn't remembered being there. But I knew the general gist of the story. Most of us do.

If we were raised in the church and attended Sunday School or Vacation Bible School, then the story of the Good Samaritan was probably one of the first Bible stories we heard – it's simple enough for even children to grasp and so we hear it from our earliest years.

But, even if we weren't raised in the church, chances are good we were still familiar with the story of the Good Samaritan before we first read it as an adult or heard it preached. It's just one of those stories that our society latches onto and claims as its own. It's a lesson primary school teachers get across in one fashion or another – don't hit your neighbor, share, be nice to *all* the kids in the class ...; being neighborly is one of the foundations our society runs on. Programs like welfare and head start are based on such principles – the idea that you help those who are in need, those who are in the gutters – you **don't** simply walk past them and ignore them ...

So. If we know the story so well already, why do we bother to read it over and over again in church? When people create the schedule of readings for Sunday worship each year why don't they leave out stories like the Good Samaritan, stories we all already know? Why don't they focus on lesser-known stories or more challenging stories?

Maybe it is to make us feel good about ourselves. On Sundays like today, perhaps we are able to read the lesson and sit back and say, 'oh yeah, I know that story; I know being neighborly is important.' Or perhaps, more likely, it's a commitment to hearing as much of the Bible as possible, even if it means hearing a few well-known stories over and over. Or perhaps, there is another reason.

For the writers of *10<sup>th</sup> and Luke*, a modern retelling of the Good Samaritan in musical form, we keep reading the story again in order to give ourselves another chance to really hear the story – to wonder together, in the absence of Samaritans, who *are* our neighbors? Reading the story one more time, asking the question together one more time, these activities help us bring an old, old story into our present context. They help clear preconceived notions about who our neighbors are and what discipleship looks like in our context.

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If you're like me, then the story of the Good Samaritan is one you brush off, assuring yourself you already know all about loving your neighbors. But, when I finally took the time to actually read the whole story again, rather than assuming I knew what it said, I realized the story isn't really about loving your neighbor, at least not all of it.

The commandment to love your neighbor is merely the prelude into the story of the Good Samaritan. The story itself is an inquiry into who our neighbors are: who is it that we would help if we saw them on the street? Or, who would help us if we were lying in the gutter?

When we think ‘neighbor’ we tend to think those who live near us: our next door neighbors, or those neighbors just down the street; neighbors are generally people we see everyday, whether we talk to them or not. Indeed, the word originally stemmed from words that meant near and farmer. So neighbors were near farmers. It was, according to word historians, the Christian usage that broadened our understanding of neighbor:

As we heard earlier, it was a lawyer testing Jesus who first asked what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus tells him to do what is written in the law. The lawyer neatly sums it up in the familiar phrases: you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and with all your mind; and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus responds that he has answered correctly and it seems the matter is resolved.

Yet, ever a stickler for details, the man persists, asking, ‘but who is my neighbor?’ Trying to make sure he has done all he needs to do, the man is looking for a hard and fast definition of who he must love as much as he loves himself. Yet, instead of a concise definition, he is given a parable.

And so it is that we hear about the man going from Jerusalem to Jericho who falls into the hands of thieves who strip him, rob him, beat him, and leave him for dead in the gutter. The first person to pass him is a priest, surely a balm for the situation at hand; but the priest merely passes to the other side of the road and continues on his way.

Next to pass is a Levite, also a member of the religious elite of the time, and he too, like the Priest, chooses to cross the road and pass on the other side. For both the Priest and the Levite, to touch the injured man is to risk, among other things, defiling their ritual purity. It is not only beneath their class to stop and help one who has gotten himself into such a bind, but it is unclean for them to do so.

Finally, and most surprisingly, a Samaritan comes along. And, as we all know, it is the Samaritan, the one who was raised to hate the man, and the one who the man was raised to hate, who finally stops to help the victim. When asked who acted as a neighbor, the lawyer who initially posed the question is forced to respond “the one who showed him mercy.”

So. In our world, where there are no Samaritans, who are our neighbors? Clearly, as Christians, our neighbors are more than just those who live near us, but who, exactly are they?

As I mentioned earlier, the writers of *10<sup>th</sup> and Luke* attempt to answer that very question in their musical rendition of the Good Samaritan set in modern times. In the story, a young woman sets off on a journey hoping for discovery and transformation asking the question ‘how do I live life?’ As she ventures out into the world, she encounters a homeless man who pursues her asking

for compassion and understanding. The young woman, afraid of the man's ragged appearance and determined doggedness, is gratefully rescued by a charismatic young man who sweeps her away and offers to show her the town. Yet, the young woman encounters trouble once again as her tour guide turns out to be a man with many debts who presses her forcefully for money in exchange for having rescued her earlier. As the man becomes more forceful, the argument escalates to physical violence and the young woman falls, hits her head on the concrete and is left unconscious.

And so we have our modern day Good Samaritan situation. And, as we might guess, it is the original homeless man who finally comes to the young woman's aid after a politician and a rich woman pass her by on the other side of the street.

*10<sup>th</sup> and Luke* is a potentially explosive social commentary on how the people we fear and ignore the most can surprise us with their humanity and come to our aid even when we fail to come to theirs. Yet, the story is not quite the same as the original. For, while *10<sup>th</sup> and Luke* tips our notions of who is in need upside down, it does necessarily challenge our idea of neighbor in quite the same way as the original parable.

We may, perhaps, be raised to fear those who are homeless, those who look different, those who live lives we ourselves cannot imagine living, but not many of us are raised to hate them. One of the powerful twists of the Good Samaritan, which we often lose in our own context, is that the very one who we are raised to hate, and who is raised to hate us, is the one who will help us in the end. While a homeless man helping a young woman is a social commentary we need to hear; we also need to hear the original one, which might sound something a little like more this:

A young American man is walking along the streets of Paris looking for a particular tourist destination he is hoping to see. He is set upon by muggers who take his wallet and his passport, his cell phone and all his belongings, beat him within an inch of his life and leave him alone and deserted on the sidewalk.

Fortunately, along comes the American Ambassador, surely a remedy for the situation at hand, but he merely crosses the street and continues on his way, silently berating the slow downfall of a society where such things are allowed to happen. Next comes a police officer on break who also crosses the street wondering why Americans always manage to get themselves into such trouble and thanking his lucky stars that his shift has just ended. Finally, along comes a terrorist who is being sought by multiple governments for terrorist activities and is currently hiding out in Paris until it is safe to return home. It is the terrorist who, seeing the American with his American flag shirt ripped and torn, crosses the street, picks him up, takes him to the nearest hostel and pays for a room and a little extra for the owner to take care of him, promising to return in a few days and settle the bill and check on the young man.

Our neighbors are not only the people who live next door; they are not only the people who need our help; not only the people who we've been raised to appreciate and respect. Our neighbors are also those who we dislike and those who dislike us.

What we need to remember when we read the story of the Good Samaritan is that people are bigger than the labels we place on them, bigger than the labels they put on themselves. People are not the stereotypes nor the hatreds that they, or we, are born into believing. People, **all** people, are children of God and that makes them our neighbors. When we remember *that*, then we can remember the commandment: love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.

Amen.

**CHARGE:**<sup>1</sup>

God has shown you what is good.  
What does the Lord require of you,  
but to do justice  
and to love kindness  
and to walk humbly with your God?

**BLESSING:**<sup>2</sup>

May the God of hope  
fill you with all joy & peace in believing  
so that you may abound in hope  
by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> from Book of Common Worship

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.