

The Good Samaritan
Luke 10:25-37
July 14, 2019
First Presbyterian, Luling

Not too long ago, a couple of years maybe, Beth and I were driving to Mo Ranch for a Presbytery meeting. I won't put the burden of this story on Beth, but I'm just letting you know she was with me in the car. We were almost there, on the windy part of the road between Ingram and Hunt. As we went around the bend there was a car pulled over on the side of the road. A man in a blazer and slacks was standing behind the car, talking on his cell phone.

A million thoughts ran through my head in the space of a few seconds: Hmm...maybe we should pull over and see if this man needs help....But what could I do, really, besides commiserate with him...I wonder if he's going to Mo Ranch too...I wonder if I know him...but I couldn't really help in any substantial way anyway—he is certainly capable of changing his own tire, and it's not like I can fix a car on the side of the road, like I'm Jimmy Manford or somebody...oh well, we need to get to this meeting...surely someone else with more skills than I have will come along and give him a hand.

As we traveled on the 20 minutes or so until we reached Mo Ranch, it kind of nagged at me. A person wearing a blazer and slacks on a Hill Country road on a Friday was a little out of place. And it seemed like a great coincidence that there was a meeting happening where some people would be wearing a blazer and slacks, though I myself had taken the opportunity to dress more casually. I bet I knew the guy, and even if I didn't, I now thought that there was a pretty good chance he had been heading to the Presbytery meeting. I should have stopped to see if I could be of help, I thought. It would be too far to go back now, though. He was probably already gone.

It turned out, as we found out later that afternoon, I did know the guy. It was my colleague Jim Rigby, who pastors St. Andrews Presbyterian in Austin. I had passed him by on the side of the road. And likely had many other people at that very same meeting. What made it worse was that Jim has spent years feeling like an outcast from the Presbytery, because of his strong and uncompromising stands for justice for immigrants and LGBTQ church members. He has been in the Presbytery for over 30 years, and at that very meeting was the first time he had ever been asked to do any kind of presentation. And he had had a flat tire, and was by the side of the road, and was going to be late for this first-in-his career

presentation to the Presbytery. Nobody stopped to help. As he was telling the story to the Presbytery, he didn't even seem surprised that he was out there, alone, on the side of the road. He called a tow truck from Kerrville, who drove him and his car to Discount Tire, where he had to replace all four tires before he could get back on the road to Mo Ranch.

He was telling us all of this by way of apologizing for being late. He wasn't upset that none of us had stopped to help. If he had felt offended, I think he would have said so. He has not hesitated in the past to call out his colleagues and fellow Christians for un-Christ-like behavior, but he didn't do so now. He had taken care of the problem, with the help of the tow truck driver and the good people at Discount Tire, and was only upset that he was late to what felt to him like a momentous occasion.

I, however, felt awful. I knew I should have stopped. Why did I talk myself out of it? I had a million excuses that seemed legitimate at the time, but Jim really needed a hand, or at least a ride, and I hadn't done a thing besides pass by on the other side of the road, so to speak. Then I started to feel worse: why did it matter that this man on the side of the road was someone I knew? Shouldn't I have felt just as bad if it were a stranger?

I found Jim and apologized later, for leaving him out there with his flat tire. He again didn't seem offended, was not hurt, and did not think I should feel bad for driving by. However. Here I am, all this time later, still thinking about it.

It isn't a perfect parallel to the Good Samaritan, of course. Jim was on the side of the road because he let his tires get worn out, not because he was attacked by bandits and robbers. He wasn't hurt, and he had plenty of resources at his disposal. And there wasn't a Good Samaritan in the story, unless it was the tow truck driver, but since that's his job that he was paid to do, I don't think that really works. However, I suppose that I do qualify as the priest and the Levite who pass by. Kind of.

I've been reading a book about the parables, and there's a chapter on the Good Samaritan. The book is by a Jewish New Testament scholar, who brings an unusual perspective to the parables, unusual enough that she's got me to thinking seriously about what I have always assumed.¹

There's a lot I'd love to share from the book, but for today, here's one thing: I had always known that the Jewish people of Jesus's time were opposed to the Samaritans, that they believed they were less-than, that they were considered not as faithful or "real" Jews.

¹ Levine, Amy-Jill, *Short Stories by Jesus*, HarperOne, 2014.

But, it turns out that that is just a mild description of the animosity between them. They *hated* each other. They were *enemies*.² Those are strong words, but maybe not strong enough. The Samaritans, through history, had done terrible things to the Jewish people. And the Jewish people had done terrible things to the Samaritans. Their disagreements were not over the substance of the Law, but over where the proper place was to worship the Lord. Which seems ridiculous to us, but we might take a close look at the things we disagree over and take a step back. Their disagreements had grown to the point that they were enemies, that a Jewish person would never have been able to conceive of using the adjective “good” to describe a Samaritan or a Samaritan’s actions, to the point that a Jewish person, wounded and desperate and lying in a ditch, might not really have wanted a Samaritan’s help, would have been repulsed and frightened at the very thought of being in close contact with a Samaritan. That’s how much they hated each other. Hatred that turns to fear that in turn reinforces the hate.

That’s the background of the parable. All three of the people who encounter the wounded man are equally versed in the Law, which required that they help him, regardless of who they were or who he was. The first two people ignore the Law for reasons that Jesus does not explain, but which plenty of people have filled in motivations, probably based on their own reasons for passing by someone who needs help. So I could fill in all the reasons I drove past Jim Rigby on the road to Mo Ranch. And more—I have plenty of justifications for why I don’t stop and help, some of them better than others—I don’t want to get involved, I’m in a hurry, the kids are with me, the kids are not with me, I’m afraid of that person, I’m afraid that person is faking their injury to lure me closer and hurt me, what if that person needs more than I’m prepared to help with, what if that person is afraid of me, I have other important and compassionate things to do, there are too many people who need help and it’s overwhelming, the reasons these people are hurting are too powerful for me to confront, and on and on. All of my excuses end up in the same place: me, passing by on the other side of the road, turning my head so I don’t have to see the hurt I have caused, hurt on top of wounds that were already there.

The Samaritan, the no-good, very-bad, completely-wrong immoral enemy, is the one who has compassion, the one who helps, not just with a quick band-aid and going on his way, but with real, long-term help.

And Jesus, the one telling this story, remember, points out that the no-good, very-bad, completely-wrong immoral enemy Samaritan was the only one

² Levine, see the whole chapter, but especially pgs. 103-110.

who was a neighbor to the wounded man. The lawyer questioning Jesus has already noted that the Law requires us to love our neighbor. Jesus in other places will tell us that we are required to love our enemies, too. And love is not just a feeling, but an action. And being a neighbor is characterized not by who the neighbor *is* but with what the neighbor *does*.³ And if the person does nothing, they aren't a neighbor.

My enemies might not be the same as yours. The people who scare me may not be the same people who scare you. Samaritans for me might not be Samaritans for you. And the wounded man in the ditch may or may not be someone you know. But Jesus calls us to be a neighbor, to love our enemies, to be moved by compassion and give real help, *no matter who is in the ditch and no matter who we are, if we claim to be his disciples.*

This may not sound profound or insightful, but for those of us like me, who are far more likely to pass by on the other side of the road, it is a challenging call to faithful discipleship. Go, and do likewise.

³ Levine, 113.