

The Good Samaritan (Parables 2)

Luke 10:25-37, Deuteronomy 6:4-9, Leviticus 19:18

October 13, 2019

First Presbyterian, Luling

I have pretty close to a zero tolerance policy for snakes. . If a snake is in my space, I'm going to get the hoe first and ask it for identification later. I've killed a couple of rat snakes, or chicken snakes, that were too close to my front door before. No matter how many times you tell me that they are good snakes and eat mice, I'm sorry, but they're in my yard. A friend posted a picture of a snake that she encountered in her yard the other day, saying that she and the snake had agreed to live harmoniously. That's lovely, except it was a copperhead. As far as I'm concerned, the only good snake is one that I never see and therefore never have to think about.

I remember when our girls were little, and I would try to teach them about nature. Bugs, for instance. I have very little mercy when it comes to most bugs, especially if they are in my house. Roaches, scorpions, spiders, houseflies, fruit flies, silverfish, those weird creepy beetles that do a flip when you touch them and their eyes glow in the dark: all of those, if I see them, I'm going to get them with the flyswatter or a flip flop or whatever is close at hand. Yellow jackets, red wasps, hornets: they're gone, too. Even if I am outside, I will go out of my way to swat a mosquito, and if I ever see a chigger, you can bet your bottom dollar that I will smush it happily. But every once in while, I would say to the girls, "oh, look, this is a good bug." Ladybugs, preying mantises, walking sticks. I try to leave bees alone, though Rachel is not happy about that, because she got stung once, four years ago, and has neither forgotten nor forgiven it. My default position is that bugs are bad, but I'm willing to make an exception—more so than with snakes—for the occasional "good" bug.

So, to follow this bit of insect logic, if I say "bug," you can safely assume it's a bad bug. No need for an adjective. To describe a good bug, I have to use the word "good," because my default position is that all bugs are bad, unless I say otherwise. If I say "good" bug, it is because this bug is unusual, outside the normal category of "bugs."

You may see where I'm going with this. We generally call this parable the parable of the "Good" Samaritan. Which is a very Israelite way of titling it. By calling it the Good Samaritan, we're unintentionally implying the very same thing that I mean when I call a ladybug a good bug. This particular Samaritan was good,

but we have to specify, because otherwise we would assume that all Samaritans, including this one, are bad. We have to call this Samaritan good, because he is outside the normal category of Samaritans.

This would seem perfectly normal to ancient Israelites for generations and centuries. The chapter we're reading for today for our book study after church outlines long years of conflict and bad feelings and worse assumptions between the Israelites and Samaritans. Each group thought the other was wrong and contaminated and evil. They thought each other were evil. Each group thought they had the truth, and that God agreed with their ways of understanding and their ways of worship, and believed really and truly that the other group was wrong, willfully wrong, morally wrong, religiously wrong. Each group believe they as a group, and individually, they were superior to the other group. That is, the worst Israelite was better than the best Samaritan. Or from the other side, the worst Samaritan was better than the best Israelite. They would have been fine if they other group had become suddenly extinct. This conflict cost lives. It was bad, really bad.

We have a somewhat similar example pretty close to home. I'd love to say that the conflict in our own country between people of different races was no longer with us. I'd love to say that we're beyond it. But an African-American friend told a story this week of something that happened to her in the Charlotte, North Carolina airport. It was early—4:00 in the morning, but as you know, Charlotte is a hub airport, and there are a lot of flights, and so there were a bunch of people waiting in line at security at 4:00 a.m. for the TSA agents to open up the screenings. Any group of people at 4 a.m. is bound to be a little grumbly. And any group of people at an airport is bound to be cranky. I don't know what it is about airports—probably them treating human beings more like cattle going to an auction—but airports do not bring out the best in us. Even having said that, what happened was inexcusable. As the agents arrived, a white man called out loudly, "let the white people go first!" It is 2019. And he said that, and he meant it, and he was not joking, and he did not believe it was wrong for him to say it, or wrong for him to mean it. In his mind, the worst white person is better than the best black person, and he thought being a white person meant that he could control what happened in this line, to his own benefit.

My friend was not surprised this happened, because she hears things like this all the time. I was surprised. I shouldn't be. I've been thinking about it all week.

This analogy isn't quite right, because the Samaritans and Israelites were on more-or-less equal footing. No group had more power or more money than the other. One group wasn't oppressing the other, either at the time or ever in their history. They were equally ugly to each other. Our history is not quite the same, as the group of white people in our country has enjoyed privilege and power over the group of African American people, by and large. But the feelings between the two groups, at least as represented by this man in the airport, are similar.

This is a long way of getting to the parable itself, but it is what made the parable have such an impact on those who heard it originally. "Good Samaritan" has become such a common phrase for us that it doesn't surprise us or shock us or disgust us in the same way that Jesus's audience would have immediately reacted.

The man in the ditch is hurt, injured, probably would have died if no one had intervened. The road between Jerusalem and Jericho was notoriously dangerous, and so the surprise is not that the robbers attacked him. I imagine there's a little surprise that the priest and the Levite passed by the injured man. The author of the book talks a bit about this. Though some people think they didn't help the injured man because they were trying to remain ritually pure, that isn't relevant. They were headed to Jericho, not to the Temple at Jerusalem. And in any case, the Law required that they help an injured person, that they tend to a dead person and bury them as quickly as possible. That was a stronger requirement, a stronger obligation, than any purity laws that might have somehow applied. So really the priest and the Levite had no good reason for passing by the injured man.

As the author points out, and like we talked about last week, this parable also follows the rule of three, like the Three Little Pigs or the Three Bears. Jesus's listeners knew and were anticipating a third person to pass by. But they were expecting it to be an Israelite. That's the way the rule of three went. A priest, a Levite, and an Israelite. That's the way the story was expected to go. And they expected that the little twist to the story--like the third piggie being smarter than the other two and building his house out of brick—they thought the twist was that the Israelite would not walk by on the other side of the road, but would stop and rescue the injured man. The Israelite would be the hero. This was going to be a great story that Jesus told.

But Jesus instead shocks them, disgusts them, horrifies them. It's hard to come up with a word that would describe how they felt when they heard "Samaritan" instead of "Israelite." The third person in the story is a

Samaritan?!?!? A no-good, dirty, wrong-headed Samaritan? The author tries to suggest some modern equivalents for how shocking this was. Perhaps an ISIS fighter? Depending on your viewpoint, a Democrat? Or a Republican? This week for me, it would be that white man in the Charlotte airport. If *he* had been the hero of Jesus's story, that would be shocking to me. That's how horrifying this was, how repulsive.

Nevertheless, Jesus makes it clear, both within the parable and in his continuing discussion with the lawyer, that it was the Samaritan who was the neighbor to the man in the ditch. Jesus makes it clear that the Samaritan was the neighbor, not because of who he was, but because of what he did, how he acted. Israelites had been accustomed to thinking of neighbors in terms of who was in their group and who was not in their group. It had been important as their nation was formed, to create and follow fairly strict boundaries of who was in and who was out. But they had forgotten that the Law prescribed the same treatment for neighbors and for strangers, or aliens. If someone was hurt, you helped them. If someone had nothing to eat, you made sure you left food in your field for them. If someone was lying dead in a ditch, you buried them. It didn't matter who they were, in reference to you. You were to love them.

Jesus even extended this obligation to enemies. The author believes that Jesus is the only teacher in antiquity to have taught that people were to love their enemies. He was unique in this, and I'm not sure we have worked hard enough to follow his teaching. Here is an illustration of it. The Samaritan loves his neighbor by what he does, not by who he is, nor by who the man in the ditch is.

Go, and do likewise. Last week someone asked if all the parables were going to be as open to interpretation as the prodigal son, for instance. I confidently said that parables didn't have a moral to the story, and that every time we read them, we come up with something different. That may be true. But this parable, the parable of the injured man in the ditch and the neighbor who helps him, comes pretty close. Go and do likewise, Jesus says. Go, and be a neighbor, not because of who you are, but because of what you are called and taught and commanded to do: love.