

# Wading River Congregational Church

## SERMONS IN PRINT

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### Luke 10:25-37 "Love Your Neighbor"

There are reasons some of us love the Gospel of Luke: the things he discovered about Jesus that none of the others did - the birth narratives, and everyone's favorite parables, *The Good Samaritan* and *The Prodigal Son*. So here we are with "Good Sam" as the SS kids like to call him! What is this all about?

It's a multi-layered story, subject to many different interpretations over the centuries. Early on it looked like a repudiation of Jewish exclusiveness - "even the hated Samaritans can be bearers of God's grace!" For centuries, when allegorical interpretation was popular, Good Sam meant the whole story of fall and redemption: the traveler was Adam, Jerusalem was paradise, Jericho was the world, the robbers were satanic forces, the priest was the Law, the Levite the Prophets, the Samaritan was Christ, the inn was the church, the Samaritan's return was the Second Coming, etc.

All very intriguing, but of course wrenched out of context to make the parable speak "timeless truths." By the time of the Reformation, the focus of interpretation had become *why* Jesus would have told this story in answer to the question posed by this particular man, a Scribe, an "expert in the law," who apparently was trying to trip Jesus up and "test him."

### 1) *The Great Commandment*

The Scribe's motive is hidden behind an apparently legitimate question: "*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*" He knows that "the resurrection of the righteous" is ahead, and he assumes that "righteousness" comes from Torah observance, which he is an expert on. But he betrays, as Luke says, his desire "*to justify himself*" - to be reassured that his status in the community as a teacher and keeper of the Law really means that he will be part of "the age to come."

So although he knows "*The Great Commandment*" - *Love God and Love Neighbor* - he wants to know he can keep it by restricting the number of people he must love as neighbors. It used to be easier - love fellow Israelites, hate Gentiles - but now in the 1<sup>st</sup> C. it's complicated: Greek-speakers, Roman rulers, Jewish factions all over the land: Essenes despise Pharisees, Pharisees despise Sadducees, some people love and some people hate the Zealots, everyone despises the Herodians and the Romans.

*Samaritans* are just another example: half Jewish, half some Eastern tribes imported by the Assyrians after they conquered the north, centuries before. They had their own separate kingdom for a while, with a capital in Samaria and their own temple (near the modern city of Nablus, where a few hundred Samaritans survive to this day!). By the 1<sup>st</sup> C., they were just social and religious outcasts within the mostly Jewish Roman province of

Judea. So the Scribe has a real problem: "*Who is my neighbor?*" and who, therefore, "*must I love?*"

## 2) *The Parable*

The story: an un-named man travels down the 17-mile stretch from the city atop Mt. Zion to the Jordan valley, a descent of 3000 feet. Brigands beat, rob, and strip him, leaving him to die beside the road. Despite the dangers, many people do pass this way, especially priests who serve in Jerusalem but live down in Jericho. A full priest, and an assistant "Levite," take a look and then "*pass by on the other side.*" They're often excused as being concerned about purity, and not "contaminating" themselves with corpses. But the text says they too were going down to Jericho - going home! Their problem is not so much purity as simple self-interest, we suspect. They didn't want to get involved, for all the same reasons we don't want to get involved when we see something on the side of the road!

Scholars tell us this is shaping up as a classic 1<sup>st</sup> C. Jewish story - "a Priest passes by, a Levite passes by," and the hero who stops to help will be "a simple Jewish peasant with more compassion than those Temple types." Some Jewish commentators even believe Jesus' story was changed. But it sounds much more like Jesus to insert a Samaritan just where the crowd expected a Jewish peasant!

*The Samaritan* is now the one who obeys Torah, showing compassion, taking care of the wounded man, generously taking him to an inn and paying for him. We know it's quite like Jesus to say "there are people outside 'Israel' who are more obedient to God than the Temple hierarchy - including this self-justifying Scribe - and today God is at work among all nations, calling a new people to himself." The "kingdom of God"

will arise chiefly among "the poor" - the despised, the outcast, people with no status. A Samaritan traveler fits perfectly.

Suddenly the Scribe's "*who is my neighbor*" has been turned by Jesus into "*how do I act as a neighbor?*" It invites the Scribe to reflect on doing Torah, and not just teaching it; to see Samaritans and others as neighbors he must love; to imagine himself as the man beaten and robbed, who would welcome anyone's help, without asking who they were. Now he sees that his neighbor is any person in need, and to be a neighbor is to be compassionate and caring to people in need.

## 3) *Love Your Neighbor*

So how should followers of Jesus obey the second half of "the Great Commandment" - how do we "*love our neighbor as ourselves*"? In the original Levitical text, the LORD said "*be holy because I am holy,*" and do that by acts of kindness, compassion, and generosity to other people. That would include your father and mother whom you should respect, the alien who works in your fields and deserves to glean around the edges, the worker who deserves his wages, the neighbor whom you should not slander, defraud, curse, or cause harm to by bribing the town judge, or putting obstacles in front of blind people, or plotting revenge against other clans.

God's people love him by showing their *gratitude*, and love each other by showing their *generosity*. They should especially help people who have trouble helping themselves. That sounds obvious, but of course it flies in the face of many basic instincts of our culture, and a good many others! We like to be independent, to rely on nobody; we don't need anyone's charity, we keep ourselves to ourselves, we don't want the government interfering in our lives - or the church! We believe "the underclass" live in a "culture of dependence" based on too many

government handouts. We think taxing rich people to provide health care for poor people is probably "socialism" and certainly "un-American."

We have little time for Christian virtues like *compassion* - a Latin word that means "feeling the hurt of others" - or *empathy* - the Greek equivalent meaning "understanding the feelings of others." We may pay lip service to Jesus' renowned compassion, but we seem to be scared of a Supreme Court justice being an empathic person.

We are unsure about care and generosity. Thank God that the "Great Recession" we are now experiencing has begun to soften us, and make us aware of neighbors who are out of food and may soon be out of their homes. We know that real unemployment is maybe twice the official 10%, and we are starting to grasp that "*there but for the grace of God go I.*" We can now imagine that if *we* were out of food, we would not care about the ethnicity of the person who gave us some. We are beginning to grasp that as Christians called to "love our neighbors," we have to be generous to whoever needs help. We cannot be choosy in the face of poverty and need. Some people are in need because they cannot help themselves, and will likely never be able to. Some people have been beaten up by brigands along the road of life. Some people have made bad choices that have gotten them into places they cannot find their way out of.

Our call is to "love other people *as we love ourselves.*" Some writers have tried to turn that into a commandment to "first love ourselves, so we have something to give." But the Bible everywhere assumes that we know only too well how to love ourselves, and need to get out of that self-centered existence and in the name of Jesus Christ start to help other people!

I read this week an illustration of the parable of the Good Samaritan that I had not heard before (I owe this to Rev. Brad Braxton, until recently Pastor of the Riverside Church). He wrote that in March 1968, Martin Luther King had gone to Memphis, TN to support black sanitation workers who were seriously discriminated against in wages and working conditions. In a speech in Memphis, King drew on the parable of the Good Samaritan. To those who doubted that they wanted to get involved with the complaints of black sanitation workers, King said "*the question is not 'If I stop to help this man in need, what will happen to me?' 'If I don't stop, what will happen to him?' - that is the question!*" King "stopped to help" in Memphis, and a few days later was shot dead.

It's all too easy to "*pass by on the other side.*" We all do it, too much of the time. Somehow God's love for us, and Jesus' compassion for us, must stir us to love God and love neighbor - *to show gratitude to God and generosity to neighbor* - and make us stop and help when we meet a need. There is good reason that it has become proverbially bad to "pass by on the other side." We ought not to do it if we claim to be disciples of Jesus.

Does that mean we have to stop every time we see a road accident on the LIE? No, but we better at least be ready, if we are first on the scene, to dial 911. You may save someone's life for the sake of a few minutes delay on your journey. Does it mean we hand over cash to every panhandler in Penn Station? Probably not. Does it mean we hand out cash to people who wander into the church during the week? No - we tell them there are many ways we can help them, but putting cash in their hands now is not one of them.

Who is "lying beat up beside the road of life" in our corners of the world? At work? On our street? In our extended family? What can

we do to help? What will happen to us if we do? We don't know. What will happen to them if we don't? That's all too predictable! Lord give us compassion, help us feel the pain of others, give us courage to do what we can to ease it in the name of Jesus Christ.

Because generous care, after all, is what Jesus has given us - he put himself in danger, he healed our wounds, he carried us to a place of safety, he paid our price - and if we are ever to love our neighbors as we should, it will be because he has first loved us. God's love for us in Jesus is the gift we must receive, if we are to be able to love him and to love other people.

Let us pray...