

The Good Samaritan

Luke 10:25-37

READ Luke 10:25-37

There are a lot of terms and sayings in common use in our society that have Biblical roots. Things like David-and-Goliath, Adam-and-Eve, “an eye for an eye”, “judge not”, the olive branch, the fig leaf – that list could go on for a while – plus some things that people may think come from the Bible like “God helps those who help themselves”, which is not only not Biblical (it is a quote from Ben Franklin, who may well have been an atheist, most certainly not a Christian) but is actually quite heretical – the direct opposite of grace. For the most part, people in our society seem to think that it is quite all-right to spout truisms and phrases and words that, if they sound good, might be attributable to God. We often get it wrong.

This story that we know as “The Good Samaritan” is a shining example of a term with a Biblical origin that is widely mis-used and mis-understood. If you polled the first 100 people you saw outside of a church setting, I expect almost all of them would give you some sort of definition for the term “Good Samaritan”. I can’t guess how many would know that it comes from a parable of Jesus that is found only in the Gospel of Luke. I suspect most people just think of a “Good Samaritan” as someone who stops to help when they really didn’t have any obligation to do so, with no idea who a “Samaritan” might be, or what it really means to be “good”. Helping people in need is certainly not a bad thing. But we need to go deeper here, to understand the story and what Jesus meant for us to learn from it, other than it is a very nice thing to help people in need. I think we can go deeper by looking at the words “good” and “Samaritan”. I think we will find that Jesus did not tell this story just to get people to be nicer to each other, but to turn their world upside down. Those are two very different purposes.

When Jesus was telling this story, many of those listening would have expected the third person to come upon the wounded traveler to be a common Jewish lay person. Jesus had already called out the priest and the Levite for their disregard of the man, and the general populace would have been nodding to each other and thinking something like “Now He is going to get to us real people, not those uppity high muckity-mucks who won’t dare get their hands dirty”. They were thinking that the hero of this story was going to be one of them. Not one of those fine Jewish folks would have been prepared for the hero to be a Samaritan. They

hated the Samaritans, and expected Jesus to hate them too since He was a Jew, and a well-respected teacher Himself.

The enmity between the Jews and Samaritans went back to the time after the reign of King Solomon when the kingdom of Israel was divided into the Northern Kingdom, which took the name Israel, and the Southern Kingdom, which was known as Judah. They all had a common heritage in the tribes descended from Joseph, with the Southern Kingdom of Judah composed mostly of the descendants of Judah and Benjamin. The Northern Kingdom was made up of the other 10 tribes, at least until the Assyrians conquered and dispersed them about 700 years before the time of Christ. The Southern Kingdom had Jerusalem as its capital and center of worship. The Northern Kingdom established its own center of worship at Bethel, which was intolerable to the Southern Kingdom. The term “Samaria” was the name of a major city in the Northern Kingdom as well as a region of that kingdom, between Galilee and Jerusalem. There is a whole lot of history here, but it is not too bad a short cut to think of them as Hatfields and McCoys. Cogginsⁱ summarizes it this way: “It seems most appropriate to regard the Samaritans as a religious community that developed independently of the spiritual leadership of Jerusalem among a people who were, for cultural and historical reasons, alienated from the Jews and who, in time, found it impossible to maintain fraternal relations.” That is a diplomatic way of saying they hated each other, mostly for reasons that, centuries removed from the original argument, few, if any, of them could name.

None of that mattered to Jesus. Every aspect of His ministry included the Samaritans, along with Gentiles of every stripe, Romans, and everybody else whether the mainstream of Judaism thought they should be included or not. But here, the Samaritans are not just one of the groups who now find themselves suddenly within the reach of this new Jewish rabbi’s ministry, they are the means by which Jesus is teaching the Jews what it means to be people of God. Jesus was turning their world-view upside down.

The listeners here were already off balance because of how Jesus was re-defining what it meant to be “good”. The lawyer who started this conversation thought he was on solid ground, because he already knew the answer to the question he was asking. He had great cross-examination technique: never ask a witness a question that you do not know the answer to. The teachers of the law would commonly have had a little leather pouch on their wrist that

contained Scriptures including the two he quoted here, found at Deuteronomy 6:5: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all our soul and with all your strength and with all your mind” and Leviticus 19:18: “Love your neighbor as yourself”. These are the same answers given by Jesus in an exchange recorded by Matthew at 22:34 when He was asked to name the greatest commandment. So by the letter of the law, the lawyer here had it right. The challenge was how to apply that to life.

The fundamental question here is not about how to get to heaven. The fundamental question is about living and being in right relationship with God, which is how you get to heaven. Living and being in right relationship with God means putting God first, not allowing anything to take higher priority in any aspect of your life than your relationship with God. Get that priority right, and everything else follows in its proper order. Living and being in right relationship with God means that in the depths of our hearts we know that every person is a child of God, and we treat them as such. Even Samaritans.

In Gospels of Matthew and Mark and later in Luke we find similar exchanges, though the question is a little different, and the response of Jesus does not include the parableⁱⁱ. In those other conversations, the question from the lawyer starts with “Good Teacher...”, and Jesus immediately responds “Why do you call me ‘good’? There is none good but God.” In this parable that we know as the “Good Samaritan”, Jesus redefines “good”, not in terms the people expected by reference only to the law and the commandments, but to the law and commandments applied – to life in right relationship with God. The Jewish audience for this parable would have been stunned. Inheriting eternal life was not just about following the rules; it was about being “good”, and the only “good” that mattered at all not about what we do; it was about right relationship with God, and the example was a Samaritan. The lawyer who started his question with “Good Teacher” had nailed the right answer without even knowing it. Jesus was “good” in exactly the way Scripture defined it – living and being in right relationship with God, showing us how to make that relationship our highest priority and acting as instruments of God’s love and grace to all God’s children. Jesus was the definition of “good” because He was God, and living after His example is what “good” means to us.

A man was going down the road from Live Oak to Mayo, when he was overtaken by some thieves. They stole his car and money, stripped off his clothes, beat him and went away,

leaving him half dead by the side of the road. A local pastor happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side because he was on his way to an important church meeting and could not be late. So too, a man and his wife, well-regarded, church-going people, came to the place and saw the man, but they passed by on the other side of the road because they were on their way to take a meal to a sick church member and had the kids in the car. Neither the pastor nor the couple even called 911. But a Mexican migrant worker on his way in from a long day in the fields came to where the man was, and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and tore his clean extra shirt into strips, and used them and the water from his cooler to clean and bandage the man's wounds. Then he helped the man into his truck and took him to town. He went to a motel where he knew the owner, and left what money he had there. "Please look after him," he said to the motel owner, "and I will come back by here after we get paid, and pay you back for any extra charges."

We are invited to find ourselves in this parable, and it disturbs us in the same way that Jesus meant for it to disturb us, because this familiar story is no longer just about being nice people. It is about being in right relationship with God, and about that relationship making a real difference in our lives. Are we in the place of the priest and the Levite – the pastor and the good church people – passing by on the other side? Are we in the place of the injured man, bruised and battered, desperate for the touch of mercy and grace that is the mark of "good"? Are we willing to risk following the Samaritan – the migrant worker – into life as instruments of God's love and grace in a way that asks no questions about any of the characteristics that we use to sort people, and to learn from them what love of neighbor means? The one who showed mercy was living after the example of Jesus Christ – living in right relationship with God, putting God first, loving as God loves.

Go and do likewise.

Amen

ⁱ Harper Collins "Bible Dictionary", entry on Samaria

ⁱⁱ Matthew 19:16-17; Mark 10:17-18