

The Impact of a Parable  
(The Good Samaritan, Luke 10:25-36)

(That was a wonderful video of VBS! But I think I can safely guarantee you that [climbing slowly onto stool behind pulpit], in contrast to last week, we will not be starting off with gymnastics this morning.)

Last year at this time, I was asked to give a sermon at my sister's church in Virginia; afterwards, her minister came up to me and said, "That was unforgettable." My sister assures me he meant it as a compliment. But when I read the complex passage in John chapter eight, next in Tim's series, I knew it was an opportunity for another unforgettable sermon—for all the wrong reasons. So I have, instead, settled for the role of Billy J. Kramer—who fronted for the Beatles and prepared the audience for music people remembered for the right reasons. So be sure to come back next week when Tim will help us through John chapter eight.

If you've read ahead there, you know that Jesus confronts the Pharisees on their judging him, when it was He only who had the right to judge: "You judge according to the flesh; I am not judging anyone. But even if I do judge, My judgment is true; for I am not alone in it, but I and the Father who sent me." Today, in the Gospel of St. Luke, we shall explore how Christ challenged another religious scholar by looking at the judgmental attitude of a priest and a Levite. They also were, we might say, judging according to the flesh—by laws established through human effort rather than by God's wisdom and grace. But the religious scholar we shall look at today, unlike them, learned the difference between bad judgment and good judgment.

Look through the Gospel of St. Luke, and you will see that it is full of parables; and the parable of the good Samaritan is one of the most familiar. Which means we should study it all the more carefully. As explained in an article I studied recently, we have two ways of reading: casually, or closely. With even a casual reading of the Good Samaritan, we are apt to get the main point; but with a close reading, we find so much more—especially when we understand the *purpose* of a parable: For the same Latin root in parable is also in "parallel" or "next to". In other words, we are to place our behavior "next to" that displayed in the parable, and compare it.

And this parable begins when a teacher of Judaic law addresses Christ Himself as a fellow teacher, but then asks a question, "to test Him." (This is never a good idea; for guess who is going to win, and who is going to lose. It is not that God objects to an inquiring mind, but He can be very interested in the motive *behind* the inquiry, as we shall see.) In true Rabbinic style, Jesus counters the question of how to obtain eternal life with two of his own. He not only asks, "What is written in the Law?" but also, "How do you read—[or interpret]—it?"

At this point, people were possibly settling down—or backing away—in anticipation of a long legal harangue based on the Mishna, the Midrash, and other books of Hebrew law. However, quite to everyone's surprise, this scholar of the law responds concisely. He replies, "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 "Love your neighbor as yourself." With equal brevity, Jesus responds, "You have answered correctly; do this and you will live." But like many of us, this gentleman did not know to stop when he was ahead, and continues, "Who is my neighbor?"

This is where, of course, the motive behind the question is revealed. Even before the scholar asks it, the Lord sees (and St. Luke records) that the man wishes to "justify" himself. In the Greek, justify is sometimes translated as "acquit", and this gives us a clue as to the man's motive. For if he wished to acquit himself of not fully following God's two most important commands, the only way out of a guilty verdict was to narrowly define neighbor—which many Jewish laws confirmed as someone within the same culture. (Oddly, he doesn't address the first command about loving God, perhaps because, as a Hebrew, he took it for granted—or because he realized it was even more a command which no one could fully keep, and so decided not to broach it; but that is another sermon for another year.)

Christ responds with the parable that has become so famous, most of us know it by heart; but like any good

story, the more detail you know, the richer and fuller it becomes. The first thing to know is that Jericho is northeast of Jerusalem by about 18 miles; it is, in fact, on the map, *above* Jerusalem. So when people said they were going “*down* to Jericho”, they were talking highlands and lowlands, not geographic direction. Jerusalem, high above sea level, was and is rich with vegetation, some of which is still imported to England today; while Jericho, by contrast, is a low-lying desert, about halfway to Samaria. To the Jewish mind, this was perfectly appropriate: the further “*down*” you were from Jerusalem, the closer you drew to the hated Samaritans—and the lower and drier you would be, physically, and spiritually, too. The foundation of this hatred was long-standing and complex, but basically, (as we learn from the woman at the well), the Samaritans were of Jewish descent, and thought true worship of God originated on the mountain in Samaria, not on the Mount in Jerusalem—but most repellant to the Jews of Judea was the fact that Samaritans had also intermarried with gentiles who had settled there in Samaria.

We don’t know whether the man attacked was Jew, Gentile, or Samaritan. Stripped of all his clothing, it would have been nearly impossible to tell. We do know three things, however, that would have disgusted a devout Jewish traveler: He was naked in public, which, in Middle Eastern countries, is a scandal still. Beaten, he was covered in blood and body fluid; and he appeared to be dead, which, even without the blood, would have been a barrier to ceremonial purity—for Judaic law declared (in the book of Numbers) that whoever touched a human corpse would be unclean for an entire week. This would have been true for any godly Hebrew; but Levites and priests were particularly circumspect.

Of course, our poor man in the road is *not* a corpse, but the Levite and the priest, on urgent business, cannot bring themselves to see whether the man is alive or dead: For if he *is* dead, their urgent business would have to be deferred by seven days. And we know their business is indeed urgent: Anyone travelling this perilous route was in desperate haste; otherwise, a much safer and a much longer way would be used. Jesus is also here careful to point out that each one “saw” the man and “passed by on the other side”—a logical conclusion being that the body was sprawled in the middle of the road and had to be got around—it could not be overlooked. From the standpoint of Jewish law, however—which was our questioner’s field of expertise—both travelers had made a prudent and wise judgment.

“But—” Christ continues, and we can almost hear the pause that precedes the contrast, “A Samaritan...” And at the sound of the word, looks of surprise and revulsion must have appeared on the faces of all his listeners—Yet how different their reaction then, to our reaction now! For nearly every night, we hear this phrase on the news, “The motorist on 128—[or any person in distress]—was assisted by a Good Samaritan who stopped to help.” Even without the adjective, the word now has a *positive* meaning—hence the name of such charities as Samaritan’s Purse. What did this man DO to completely reverse the connotation of a word from that of “*despised*” to “*noble*”? He loved in a way that had *impact*—He loved in a way that *had impact*.

And at his own peril. For it is here significant to note that laws of ritual purity were also strictly followed by many within the Samaritan community. So the humble Samaritan possibly faced the same issue as the Priest and Levite: If the lifeless looking man were discovered to be dead when he was turned over, our third traveler could also face seven days of isolation. And there was no time to go for help: To keep the man from dying naked and alone, he had to provide the help himself—which meant not only loss of time, but loss of money—not to mention increased danger, as the Samaritan travelled with a burden which would prevent him from being either swift or inconspicuous, on a road already roiled with mayhem and murder.

Had he based his judgment on the law, the Samaritan would have gone on; but Jesus says that this man was moved with compassion, a better word here than pity: For compassion means pity plus action—and this Samaritan took action. Perhaps he had been the first century AD equivalent of a Boy Scout, for he was certainly prepared. Using wine to sterilize the wounds, and binding them with oil to soften them, he places the man on his beast and takes him to an inn. There the Samaritan stays with him until the next day, making sure the wounded man survives. He then gives the innkeeper about two days’ worth of wages, slyly inducing him to take good

care of the helpless victim—for if he is still alive when the Samaritan returns, the manager will receive even *more* money.

Jesus then turns to the scholar of the law and asks simply, “Which was the neighbor?” And the man responds, “The one who had mercy on him.” Some writers believe this phrasing is due to the fact that, even at this point, the devout Hebrew cannot bring himself to say the hated word, “Samaritan”. However, his response also highlights how Christ has changed the definition of neighbor for those gathered around listening. For the definition of *neighbor*, in this tightly knit Jewish community, was not based on location—since Samaria and Judea were next to each other—but on cultural agreement. But—Christ forces the *redefinition* of neighbor from that of cultural agreement—to one of *human connection*—for we all need mercy. The scholar had asked, “Who is my neighbor?” But Christ reverses the question to emphasize: “Whose neighbor am I?”—“Whose neighbor am I?”

Now, as anybody knows who has ever heard anyone speak from Gordon Conwell, “Context is king.” And in the context of the tenth chapter of St. Luke, the question of “Whose neighbor am I” becomes of essential importance: For earlier in the chapter, 70 disciples have been sent out to prepare the way of the Lord—but to whom? If it has been to only the Jewish community, the 70 are here about to learn a new definition of neighbor—one that extends grace and mercy to folks they didn’t know, didn’t like, and didn’t understand at all. And when they report back that “even the demons are subject to us in your name,” Christ adjures them to rejoice not in the dramatic, but that their names, through His grace, will be written in heaven—a point He is ready to discuss as our Jewish scholar then steps onto the stage and asks, “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?”

Of course, as the compassion of the Samaritan has shown us, eternal life is not a matter of inheritance; it is a matter of the love of Christ acting through us. For without Christ, none of us can fully accomplish either loving God or even loving those with whom we may disagree, whether they be in the world or the church worldwide. Yet that is how Jesus says the Church is to be known and *must* be known: “By this everyone will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another.” As we, like the 70, reach out to those around us, we can easily understand why this is important: It is love that touches the heart—It is love that touches the *heart*; and it is *Christ’s love* that will draw people to Him and to *His church*. Yet for us who *are* His church, daily love—real, acting, forgiving, and persistent love, can sometimes seem difficult and fleeting, as we struggle along in the world. But those in the world do recognize real love when they see it.

New York Times columnist David Brooks is one of my favorite writers and has just published his book, “The Road to Character.” In this best-seller, this contemporary Jewish scholar not only recognizes real love, he is fascinated by it: “[Real] love asks you to discard conditional thinking and to pour out your love in full force and not measure it by tablespoons.” To find this love, he examines the lives of St. Augustine, C.S. Lewis, G.K. Chesterton, Dorothy Day, Dorothy Sayers, and many other people of faith throughout history whose love and outreach to those around them have made a powerful impact.

But the secret to the love in the hearts of these Christians might be traced back to another Jewish scholar—who also asked Christ, long ago, “Who is my neighbor?”—and who, through a despised Samaritan, found the answer to his question: “To the one who showed him mercy.”

(Pause)

And then Jesus said, “Go, and do likewise.”

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