

**From the Pulpit of  
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, SARASOTA FL**

That Man in the Road

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Luke 10:25-37  
July 10, 2022

This parable is so familiar that maybe we don't hear it anymore, or we hear it the way we want to hear it. I don't know if there is a parable that is better known than this one that we call the Good Samaritan. Maybe the prodigal son is better known, but there aren't any Prodigal Son hospitals or prodigal sons-in-law or prodigal sons mentioned on the evening news. But say "Good Samaritan," and people immediately come up with a mental image of people stopping to help other people. We even think that Jesus told the story in order to say, "Be nice to people in need." I don't think so.

In some ways the parable isn't so much about the Samaritan as it is about the lawyer. And maybe it isn't about the lawyer so much as it is about that man in the road. The lawyer is the one at the beginning of the passage who stood up to ask Jesus a question, "to test Jesus." "Let's see what kind of answer you're going to give on this one, Jesus, and figure out if it squares with the way we believe things to be." So, he asks his question – what must I do to inherit eternal life – which is interesting in itself, because an inheritance is a gift. Right off the bat he has missed the point. But Jesus, as he often does, asks a question in response to a question, and it is the lawyer who gives us what we call the great commandment: "Love God with all you have, and love your neighbor as yourself." Good, Jesus says, because that basically sums it all up.

This next part is where the lawyer shows his all-too-human self. We know what that is like. We want to be able to set the boundaries, to call the shots, to play the game by our rules, so that things can be more comfortable for us. "And who is my neighbor?"

My neighbor is a member of my tribe, my clan, my kind, right? Really what the lawyer is asking is this: "Who can I say is not my neighbor? Whom can I avoid?" This is something that is very important for us to think about all the things that we have been facing in the last weeks and months and years of all our tribal, us vs. them thinking.

A couple of things to mention here, which are very important in understanding the parable, but which often go overlooked. At the beginning of the story Jesus talks about the victim, "who fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead." Stripped him. That's an important part of the story. You see, an easy way to identify who was a member of your tribe, your clan, your people, was how they were dressed. In some ways we can think of this as something of a uniform. When a person is stripped of his robe, his identifying uniform, it is a lot more difficult to determine if he's one of us or one of them.

Now the two religious men come upon the man in the road, and at first glance they cannot tell if he fits their category of tribal understanding. Sadly, they don't stop to help. Now you've probably heard this part before. I've preached a lot of sermons on this passage. You've heard a lot of sermons on this passage, and you've probably heard this thought. I know I've preached it before. The priest and the Levite were devoutly religious, and they knew all the laws about being clean and unclean. To touch a corpse would make them unclean for a period of time, and, if they

were traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho in order to lead or participate in religious services, being made unclean would prevent them from doing their priestly or Levitical duties. Sound familiar?

According to Amy-Jill Levine, an Orthodox Jewish woman who teaches New Testament at Vanderbilt Divinity School, and someone from who I have learned a great deal, says this:

“Arguments that read the parable in terms of ‘uncleanness’ or ‘purity’ are made by modern Christians, not by Jesus or Luke. Neither gives the priest or Levite an excuse. Nor would any excuse be acceptable. Their responsibility was to save a life; they failed. Saving a life is so important that Jewish Law mandates that it override every other concern, including keeping the Sabbath. Their responsibility, should the man have died, was to bury the corpse. They failed here as well.”<sup>i</sup>

So the cleanliness argument does not work. The religious argument does not work. And the man is still in the road.

It is the Samaritan (and I can imagine the reaction of the people when they hear about the hated Samaritan) who stops to help. The Samaritan is the hero of the story, but he did only what the priest and Levite should have done. He did what everyone should do. We look at him as the Christ-figure in the story, because he stopped to help, and we are all supposed to be like him, right? Even the lawyer knew that the Samaritan was the one who did the right thing, although the lawyer couldn’t even say the word Samaritan when Jesus changed the question from “Who is my neighbor,” to “to whom am I a neighbor.” He could only say, “The one who showed mercy.” I think the lawyer would probably have walked around the man, not stopping to help. At the end of the story, the lawyer was probably wishing he never brought up the issue in the first place. That’s not the answer I wanted, Jesus.

But something else needs to be added here. Jesus doesn’t tell parables that are something like Aesop’s fables, with a nice little moral stuck in at the end. “Be nice to everybody.” “Be like the Samaritan.” “Help people in need.” Even, “go and do likewise.” There is more than that in this parable. Listen again to what was said about the situation: they “stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead.”

Is that not what happened to Jesus after he was arrested and sentenced to death? Is that not what happened to Jesus on the cross? What if we understood the parable in a different way, that it is *Jesus* who is in the middle of the road, yet so many people just walk around and don’t pay attention to Jesus, to this one who was “wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed.”<sup>ii</sup> Remember the words from Matthew’s gospel – when I was hungry and thirsty and a stranger, you took care of me. When did we do that? When you did it to the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me. When you did it to the man in the middle of the road you did it to me.

Some years ago, Donna and I were taken to lunch or dinner at the local country club. We weren’t members there, but some people in the church would occasionally take us to the club for a meal. A man I had met previously – not a member of the church, but a very prominent member of the community – came up to me and said, “Yes, (name of the church). Years ago a lot of people wanted to join the church, but not all of them got in.” I was stunned at that. I don’t understand why some people were not voted in as members. And I think about that man in the road.

Did you see in the news a couple of weeks ago that a church in the south did not permit a couple of black people to enter the church for a worship service? I thought that those kinds of things ended some years ago. I don't know why the ushers didn't let the people in. I think about that man in the road.

A couple of weeks ago we heard from some folks in the church about how they were not welcomed as they were in their church some years ago, because of their sexual identity. They were not permitted to be who they were, and not permitted to do what they felt led to do. I think about that man in the road.

It's not a question of whom we can ignore, or who fits our description of neighbor. It is a question of seeing Jesus in others, and ministering to them, even the least of these, Jesus' brothers and sisters. It surely goes against contemporary wisdom, surely goes against the mentality of taking care only of your own kind, your own tribe. It crosses ideological lines; it crosses political lines; it crosses historical lines; it crosses the lines we want to use to keep people divided. But it is right, and it is so much needed in this world where so many people seem to want to say to so many others, "you are not my neighbor."

Jesus was stripped, beaten, and left for dead on the cross, because in both religious and in political matters he dared to erase the lines that divided people. Jesus loved all people – the man in the road, the two who didn't stop to help the man in the road, and the Samaritan. It's not that we are called to be like the Samaritan. That's too easy. We are called to be like Jesus, who gave of himself even when people didn't understand, who loved those no one else would love, who showed such grace in a world filled with such un-grace.

And that changes the way the game is usually played. That dramatically changes the rules. And that really turns the world upside down.

Remember that man in the road.

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<sup>i</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus*, Harper One, 2014, p. 94

<sup>ii</sup> From Isaiah 53