

## A Good Samaritan?

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Luke 10:25-37

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I was glad when I discovered that the Gospel Lectionary reading for today was the parable of the Good Samaritan. It's a really rich story, but one that's often turned into a simplistic morality tale: Help others, even if they're different from you. That's the lesson in the book that James read to the children this morning. It ends by saying, "When Jesus was finished with His story, He told the people to be like the Samaritan and to be kind to everybody." It's not a bad message; it's entirely appropriate for small children; but is that what the parable is really about?

John Dominic Crossan, the New Testament scholar, calls the Parable of the Good Samaritan a challenge parable. Challenge parables, he says, pack a "theological punch." You're engrossed in the story when suddenly there's a twist, a "gotcha." But for us to hear the gotcha in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, we have to think of it in a first-century Jewish context. Who were the Samaritans?

For us, today, the word Samaritan has a very positive connotation. The only Samaritans we know about are good guys. How many hospitals, nursing homes and churches are named Good Samaritan? We even have "Good Samaritan" laws that give legal protection to people who stop and help a sick or injured person. But what would "Samaritan" have meant to someone listening to Jesus tell this story?

In Jesus' time, the Samaritans were the hated enemies of the Jews. The Samaritans had intermarried with non-Jewish people. They embraced a religion that mixed elements of Judaism with pagan rituals that the Jews considered idolatrous. The mutual hatred between the Jews and the Samaritans had existed for hundreds of years. To get an idea of the depth of feeling these people had against one another, imagine the hatred between Serbs and Muslims in modern Bosnia, or the enmity between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, or the feuding between street gangs in Los Angeles or New York.

So Jesus' listeners would have been following along with his story, thinking: "Sure, I know that road; that's a bad road; yes, I can imagine someone being robbed on that road and left for dead." Then along comes the priest, a man who would have been expected to stop and help. But he passes by on the other side of the road. He's followed by a Levite, also a religious leader. And he, too, crosses the road to avoid getting involved. Then a third man happens by. Now, in Jewish storytelling, the expectation would have been for the third man to be an Israelite; in other words an ordinary Jew. It was common at the time for stories to begin with a priest, a Levite and an Israelite—just like today when we hear a story about a doctor and a lawyer, we expect the next person to be a priest. (You know—a doctor, a lawyer and a priest walk into a bar . . .) It was the formula. But Jesus says that the third man was a Samaritan. Already this is beginning to sound uncomfortable. Where is this going? Why is this man a Samaritan instead of an Israelite?

And then comes the "gotcha": the Samaritan shows extravagant compassion and care for the man in the ditch. He tends to his wounds, carries him on his own donkey to a nearby inn, spends the night looking after him, and leaves money for his care with the innkeeper. He even promises to reimburse any additional expenses. How could a Samaritan possibly be this good?

This is a parable that turns the world of Jesus' listeners upside down. It reminds me of a story I heard recently. Picture this: It was winter and a huge blizzard left mountains of snow everywhere. An elderly man who lived alone wondered how he'd be able to get out, to get groceries, and to keep his doctor's appointment. As he watched from his window, he saw a beat-up car pull up in front of his house. Several teenagers jumped out. They were as disreputable-looking a gang as he had ever seen. Long hair, face tattoos, black leather, smoking cigarettes. When they started walking toward his house, he was alarmed. He felt so vulnerable in his home, all alone. He wondered if he should call the police. Then he noticed one of the kids getting something out of the trunk. Might it be a gun? Now he was terrified. But it wasn't a gun. It wasn't any weapon for that matter. It was snow shovels. One by one, those menacing teens took the shovels and cleared his sidewalk and driveway. Then, without even coming up to his door, they crossed the street and began to shovel out his neighbor's house. A challenge parable!

John Dominic Crossan asks, "What is a challenge parable? And he goes on to answer, "A challenge parable makes you uneasy. It takes your absolute political, economic, religious and social assumptions and tells you a story in the opposite direction that forces you to think. A challenge parable takes ordinary expectations and turns them upside down."

So what are some of the things that this parable forces us to think about?

Let's start with our expectations. When I read the story, which character did you identify with? Probably not the priest or the Levite. How about the man in the ditch? No? If you're like most of us, you probably identified with the Samaritan. If we identify with him, then this is simply a morality tale about compassion and charity. The point might be: We should be nice and help everyone, even if the person who needs our help is someone we don't like. Now, there isn't anything wrong with this message; we all know Jesus requires that we take care of one another. But this interpretation misses the punch, the gotcha, that the parable contains. If we feel uncomfortable at all, it's only because we know we don't really measure up to the goodness of the Samaritan in the story. We'll try a little harder. Maybe a little more "drive-by charity"—double down on the quick fixes and up our pledge a little—maybe that will be enough. When we identify with the Samaritan, we don't have to swallow the distaste of being the one who needs to be rescued.

When we also lose sight of the fact that a Samaritan is a hated enemy—not just a marginalized person or someone who happens to be a little different—then the message is further sanitized. When we think "anybody can be my neighbor," then we're indulging in an abstract feel-good idea we can hold in our head without raising any of our specific prejudices.\*

But let's see what happens if we identify with the one in the ditch. We've been lying here, naked, hurt, close to death. We see a man approach. It's a priest. Now we'll be rescued. But the priest passes by on the other side of the road. A Levite comes along, and he does the same. We're disappointed, we're more than disappointed, we're mad . . . but we can understand. This is a dangerous road. Perhaps they suspect a trap has been set—if they stop and come closer, they too will be attacked. They have important things to do; they can't take a chance. All is lost. And yet, a third man approaches. As he comes closer, we see that it's a Samaritan—a dirty, rotten Samaritan. No help there. He's more likely to finish me off. And so what? Would I even want to accept help from a Samaritan? Better to die. Then slowly we realize: Our enemy may very well be the person who will save us. And we do want to live. And he does save us. He not only saves us, but he does so extravagantly, taking care of all our needs.

How would Jesus' hearers react to this turn of the story? Probably with anger—at least discomfort. The Samaritan was the face of the enemy. And then we have to realize that unless we allow that person to help us, we will die. It's a very uncomfortable position to be in. Sometimes we have to allow the enemy to serve as neighbor. That's the shock of the parable.

So in this parable, Jesus isn't asking us to be Good Samaritans; he's asking us to see who the Samaritans are in our lives. And then to allow them to serve as our neighbor. This is a point that David R. Henson makes in an excellent article on the Good Samaritan on the website Patheos.

What does it mean to allow the very people we believe to be our enemies to serve as our neighbors? It means that we have to get to know them, know them as individuals. We have to look into their faces and listen to their stories. If we do this, it will be difficult to demonize them, to blame them for all that is wrong in our lives and our world. It doesn't mean that we will accept everything they have to say, or change our minds about the basic things we believe to be true. But if we can listen to them, really listen, then perhaps we'll find that we do have something to learn from them. Maybe we can start a dialogue where we can talk to each other instead of shouting at each other from a distance.

It seems our world has gotten more and more polarized. Whether we're talking about politics, religion, social issues, or anything else we really care about, we tend to separate into camps and declare the other side the enemy. We don't listen to each other; we don't even get our "facts" from the same sources. Do you go with Fox News or NPR? How could we possibly have a meaningful dialogue?

There's a book by Phil Neisser and Jacob Hess called *You're Not as Crazy as I Thought*. It models a kind of open-minded, good-spirited dialogue. Phil Neisser is a self-described "left-wing atheist." Jacob Hess is a religious man and a social conservative. They first met at a meeting of the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation. It's an organization which attempts to bring people together across divides to tackle today's toughest challenges. With seemingly very little in common other than a commitment to cross-issue dialogue, they started a year-long email experiment exploring their core disagreements about morality, power, gender roles, sexuality, race, big government, big business, and big media. It's not that the book settles any particular argument, but it attempts to show how much we can learn from one another, even when we seemingly have little in common. What it takes is the willingness to listen—to listen with good humor.

It reminds me of a time some years ago when First Central Youth asked me and Judy Gaeddert to debate the merits of singing hymns with their original wording, versus changing them to use inclusive language—language that uses gender-neutral words for human beings and God rather than always using male pronouns. (Many of you know Judy; she used to be a member of First Central.) Well, most of you know me well enough to know which side of this debate I took. I had all my bullet-points ready and was eager for the exchange. But Judy and I are good friends. So I really listened as she described the loss she felt when the words were changed in hymns that she had grown up with and that held special meaning for her. And she listened as I talked about how diminished I felt as a woman when all the references were to men. At the end we said to each other: "I'd never looked at it like that." Now that doesn't mean we changed our minds. If you sit near me in the pews, you know that I regularly change male to female pronouns as we sing the hymns and say the prayers. But I have a better understanding of those who find that troubling and prefer the hymns and prayers the way they were written. Listening to another's story makes all the difference. Now, Judy and I are friends—how much more difficult is it to listen as generously to those we consider our enemies?

And that brings me to my last point. While I believe this parable asks us to listen even to those we think are our enemies, and be willing to learn from them, it doesn't tell us that our adversaries will always be right. That would be taking the stereotype and simply reversing it. There's a subtitle to the book I mentioned earlier: *You're Not as Crazy as I Thought*. The subtitle is: *But You're Still Wrong*.

When we engage in meaningful dialogue with others who disagree with us, we gain a better understanding of the complexity of the problems we face. In the process, we might change our mind, or we might come to a position that's different from where either of us started. Or maybe we'll come away with a deeper understanding of why we hold the belief we do. And perhaps gain some insight into why others might see things differently. Isn't that what we need as we try to end the escalating tragedies like those in Baton Rouge, Minneapolis, and Dallas last week? In the long run, we'll never find a way to solve our problems if we don't learn to break through the polarization that's keeping us apart. I believe this is what Jesus wants us to learn from the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

\*See "Samaritan Lives Matter" on website "The Weekly Sift."