

Who is the Good Samaritan now?

Deuteronomy 30:11-14; Luke 10:25-37

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Prayer: Eternal God, who grants to us glimpses of eternity in the midst of time, teach us to love you with our whole being and to love our neighbors as ourselves. May your gospel bear fruit among us, as we grow in your truth, enabled by your Spirit. Help us to recognize your work in the world, even in unexpected places among unexpected people. Equip us with the prophet's mantle, laying your hand on us in blessing, encouragement, and support...

So let's begin by separating the facts from the fiction. In the scriptures, in life ... in a time of pandemic. Facts and fictions. I'd like to invite you into a time of discernment, reflection and creativity. When we began this sermon series on the parables, I asked you to consider faith and imagination together as we enter into this next chapter of ministry, this season of Lent and this season of transition for this congregation. I understand that this has come out of a season of storytelling, which has been happening here throughout the fall. We began with the parable of the mustard seed; Amie led us last week with Jesus' parable about the laborers in the vineyard. And today, although we are in a much different transition than we had anticipated, the scriptures are a wonderful tool for guiding our actions and imagination in a new day.

Jesus' parables are often not understood for what they are. They're fiction. There was no good Samaritan, in fact most of the Samaritans weren't good at all. That's why he used that example. There were no robbers – but we all know what it is to be robbed, and discarded, and perhaps we know what it is to choose whether to stop and to help, or to continue walking by at a safe distance. Jesus is using a particular tradition of storytelling, to make a larger point.

One of the best examples of a parable that we have that Jesus would have been familiar with is the book of Job. Fiction from beginning to end. But the best fiction! It informs life, is taken from life, inspires us to be our best selves. I've heard more than one person this week suggest that the pandemic can be read through the book of Job, and they're not wrong. A long meditation on what it means to suffer, and to hold faith honestly in the suffering. To be a friend, to lose everything, to live with faith and to dare to hope.

The parable of the Good Samaritan illustrates one of the most central principles of our faith. When the Samaritan is the one who lives out the law, "you shall 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 your neighbor as yourself." This is astonishing to those who heard the parable for the first time.

The wrong person did the right thing! Someone unexpected. Jesus is putting the emphasis not on who we are, but on what we do. Who is living the faith? The people we expect or those we do not expect? Not on who we were born to be, but on what we make of the lives we have. This is one of his big themes, in Jesus' ministry: finding faith, among gentiles, a centurion, a leper, those who seek healing, the pure in heart whomever they may be.

This parable is his way of illustrating the heart of the Jewish law. There are variations of "the golden rule" in nearly all of the major religions. In the midst of this pandemic, people worldwide are thinking about our circumstances in light of their faith:

- In the Muslim tradition: A Bedouin came to the prophet, grabbed the stirrup of his camel and said: O the messenger of God! Teach me something to go to heaven with it. Prophet said: "As you would have people do to you, do to them; and what you dislike to be done to you, don't do to them. Now let the stirrup go!" [This maxim is enough for you; go and act in accordance with it!]"
- In Hinduism: One should never do that to another which one regards as injurious to one's own self. This, in brief, is the rule of dharma. Other behavior is due to selfish desires.
— [Brihaspati, Mahabharata](#) (Anusasana Parva, Section CXIII, Verse 8)
- In Buddhism: One who, while himself seeking happiness, oppresses with violence other beings who also desire happiness, will not attain happiness hereafter.
— [Dhammapada](#) 10. Violence
- In Taoism: Regard your neighbor's gain as your own gain, and your neighbor's loss as your own loss.
- The Sikh: Precious like jewels are the minds of all. To hurt them is not at all good. If thou desirest thy Beloved, then hurt thou not anyone's heart.
— Guru Arjan Dev Ji 259, Guru Granth Sahib
- And friends, the golden rule can be found through all religions from A, for the Arabic religions to Z, for Zoroastrianism.

Jesus' parable has been interpreted differently throughout history. Martin Luther King, Jr turned the entire interpretation on its head when he asked not who is the Samaritan, or who is the one lying by the road, but just what is wrong with this road anyway that lies between Jerusalem and Jericho? That people come to be overwhelmed by Robbers here? This ground of injustice. Asking us to look at the larger cultural context, what is happening in troubled communities, asking people of good will to come together in service to one another's humanity and dignity.

New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine says: "to hear this parable in contemporary terms, we should think of ourselves as the person in the ditch, and then ask, "is there anyone, from any group, about whom we'd rather die than acknowledge "she offered help" or "he showed compassion?" More, is there any group whose members might rather die than help us? If so, then we know how to find the modern equivalent of the Samaritan."

If I were to take a crack at Jesus' parable, here's what it might look like this week:

A woman was walking along South Main Street here, and you know, she wasn't really feeling that well. She was so overcome with the fever, the sore throat and all, that she thought she would just sit down to rest a minute, there on a bench. And when she sat down a moment later, she thought she might just lie down, in this sunny spot, which she did. Not before putting on a face mask and using hand sanitizer. There she lay with a fever and the symptoms of coronavirus right here on South Main Street. While she lay feverishly, her purse and cell phone were stolen.

Now by chance, a healthcare professional happened along, but pretending not to notice, crossed the street and passed by on the other side of the street. Wishing there were more test kits like they have in South Korea.

Then by chance a municipal employee happened by and made a note of the woman lying there to be reported in the statistics at the end of the year. At the same time wondering about the placement of the benches on South Main Street.

But a returning citizen happened along South Main Street and when he saw the woman he had compassion upon her...having been in prison himself recently and knowing all too well what it is to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. He walked across the street and purchased a take-out bowl of chicken soup, they were delighted for the business and he brought it to the woman, careful to set it next to her and ask her if she were well enough to have something.

She sat up gratefully and had a few sips which greatly soothed her throat. Then speaking at a 6-foot distance, encouraged her to walk with him to the Urgent Care clinic and, while they walked, he called ahead to tell them she was coming. When they arrived she was immediately cared for by the staff. The good samaritan...I mean the returning citizen... stayed to make sure the paperwork was handled properly, and reported her stolen purse and helped to cancel her credit cards. In the days to come he phoned regularly to check on her.

Jesus asked "which one of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the one who was attacked? The rich young man said, "the one who showed mercy."

Jesus said, "Go and do likewise."

Friends if you are lying in the ditch today, who is helping you? If you are seeking to help someone who is vulnerable, what can you do? This week these questions have very different answers than they did last week.

I made up a story, to encourage you to think creatively about what is happening in your life this week. Today we can ask: who needs our help? We all have new barriers and new opportunities in this pandemic. Honestly, I do not know what our future holds, these are unprecedented days for all of us, on many levels.

Let's walk into this time in faith together. Let's walk with compassion and faith, and when we are fearful, let's encourage one another.

Those of us who are strong and able in the faith need to step in and lend a hand to those who falter, and not just do what is most convenient for us. Strength is for service, not status. Each one of us needs to look after the good of the people around us, asking ourselves, "How can I help?" Romans 15:1-2 (The Message)

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