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**“The Good Samaritan”**

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July 10, 2022

“On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. ‘Teacher,’ he asked, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’” (Luke 10:25)?

I suppose I think about this story just about every day of my life. I think about it whenever I open the day’s mail, with this worthwhile ministry or that is asking for financial support. I think about it whenever walking down State Street in Madison, with a homeless individual sitting on the sidewalk holding out a paper cup. I think about it when the call for volunteers goes out for Bread and Roses. I think about it when the secretary tells me there’s a gentleman in need of assistance waiting in the narthex.

How do you negotiate it all, without becoming jaded and calloused to the needs of others? I tell myself, “You can’t help everyone.” I tell myself “You certainly don’t want to feed someone’s meth addiction.” I tell myself, “Besides, you support your church and make regular donations to other charities, and you pay your taxes which support social services.” So, I do what you do. I pass by on the other side. I toss out the envelope from the synod. I say “sorry, no” to the fellow asking for money in Madison. I decide I cannot support every worthy cause in town. And yet, doing so, I can’t help but think about this 2,000-year-old story, and feel a little guilty.

Peter Hawkins, Professor of Religion at Boston College tells of when he was in New York City to see the one-man performance of *The Gospel According to Mark*. As he and his companion emerged from the theater, suddenly the door of a neighboring tavern opened and a very drunk man stumbled out and collapsed on the sidewalk in front of them. “What would Jesus do?” Hawkins writes that “With the *Gospel of Mark* ringing in my ears, it was not possible to do what one normally does in New York when a door opens and someone hurtles forth.” So, they picked up the drunk, took the man to his gorgeous Upper Eastside townhouse, managed to open the door and get him inside. But the drunk didn’t want their help. Hawkins remembers, “He wanted a drink; he wanted a smoke; he didn’t care if he burned the whole building down; he wanted us to get the [heck] out.” It was clearly time to go, but Hawkins recalls they managed to commandeer an address book and started to call the man’s friends only to hear the same answer: “he’s a spoiled, arrogant, abusive bully – and a drunk. “Forget about it.” So, before they tiptoed out, Hawkins left his card and a note. “Please call if you’d like to talk.” The man never did. No thank you note. No good neighbor award. Nothing. Hawkins concludes, however, that perhaps he stepped into this parable of the Good Samaritan “by doing, however grudgingly, what had to be done.” (*The Christian Century*, June 20-27, 2001).

That’s an important point. We don’t always have the luxury of choosing who to be charitable to. It may be a stranger. It may be someone you know, someone with whom you have a history, someone who is cantankerous and ungrateful and entitled and in the habit of making poor choices. Yet God has put that someone in your path.

What prompted Jesus to tell the story of the Good Samaritan was a question: “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” That’s an important question, a question everyone asks sooner or later. The one who asked it was a lawyer; skilled at asking questions to get information, but also to entangle and implicate. He’s there, Luke says, to test Jesus. Jesus turns the question – “You’re a lawyer. What does the law say?” The lawyer recites it word for word. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” “Do this” Jesus says, “and you will live.” Not liking that answer, he changes the topic: “Who exactly is my neighbor?” Is it the guy living in the house next door or in the village a couple miles away? Is my neighbor the person I know, or does it include the stranger? Are my neighbors only among the faithful, or also among unbelievers? Only those who are good and kind and innocent, or those who seem to find trouble and make poor choices?

Jesus answers with a story, a story about a Jewish man walking down the treacherous 17-mile road from Jerusalem to Jericho. He is ambushed by thugs: attacked, robbed, beaten, stripped naked, and left to die at the side of the road. A priest, walking the same route, sees him. This gets my attention. I sympathize with this clergyman. He passes by on the other side of the road. So do I. Every day of my life. So do you. You can’t help everyone. Besides, it could be the oldest scam in the world. Lean over to see what’s going on and get clubbed from behind by the man’s partner in crime, or by the robbers who did this to him. Or stop and try to help but do the wrong thing and get sued. We can all sympathize with the priest.

A Levite follows, an assistant in the temple. He's going somewhere too, probably an important meeting. People are expecting him. He has a schedule to keep as well. He makes a wide circle around the half dead man and hurries along. These are not bad people. They are reasonable, cautious, busy people, people just like you and me who have learned a certain set of skills to survive in a dangerous world full of needy people.

Finally, along comes a Samaritan. Remember, Jews hated Samaritans. No one is expecting anything good from this Samaritan, and yet Jesus makes him the hero of the story. It's a Samaritan, not a Jew, who takes pity on the man, bandages his wounds, lifts the man onto his donkey and takes him to an inn, paying the innkeeper to look after him. In this way, as Jesus talks about compassion for one's neighbor, he adds a little twist that addresses the religious and racial bigotry of his day and ours. It's neither righteous nor just to pigeonhole people like that. It's not the main point of the parable, but it was an intentional addition along the way.

The parable is more about compassion. If you want to be faithful to God, forget about your own needs for a change, and take care of your neighbor who has bigger needs. If you want to be faithful as a Christian, find someone who needs your care, some worthy cause, someone to care about so deeply you will open your heart and soul and checkbook. That is what the Samaritan did. He put it all on the line. If you want to truly live, Jesus said elsewhere, give your life away.

That's one point. But there is, of course, another point to this parable. In this story, most of us would want to identify ourselves with and cast ourselves as the Samaritan because he's the hero of the story. He's noble and good and strong and courageous and generous. Who of us doesn't want to be like that? But a more accurate casting would place us flat on our backs, in the middle of the road, half dead, naked, without resources, utterly incapable of helping ourselves. In the Bible, that's who we are. Paul wrote, "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins" (Eph. 2:1). What can a dead person do about anything? Whoever doesn't know what it means to be utterly helpless, does not know what it means to be a Christian. We like to think ourselves self-made and self-sufficient, but we are like a newly hatched chick that has fallen out of the nest, blind, featherless, weak, and quivering. That's who we are. We cannot save ourselves but, in fact, need a Savior.

Jesus did not pass by on the other side. That, ultimately, is the main point of the parable and the Early Church Fathers saw it right away. Jesus, the Son of God, is the Good Samaritan. He is not turned off by our woeful state. Instead, he has pity on us, and comes to us and loves us. He kneels beside us, cleanses our wounds, and binds them up.

The Jews assumed the worst about Samaritans; no good can come from them. Similarly, some people today assume the worst about God . . . that He's distant and aloof and disinterested. Every chance He gets He'll make a wide path around our little disasters. He'll not come anywhere near us unless it's to yell at and judge and punish us.

But that's not the God the Bible reveals to us. Jesus, the Good Samaritan, goes out of His way and comes down to us. He draws near and bends over and binds up our wounds. He hasn't come over to punish you, or yell at you or kick you in the ribs and heap further misery on you. He's not there to condemn you for your irresponsible choices in life. The one kneeling next to you, He means you no harm. He's there to prosper you, to give you hope and a future. He's there to rescue you and to quiet you with His love. He has not passed by on the other side. He has come down and has picked you up with his strong arms and brought you back from the brink.

He goes to the cross for you. On the cross, as in the parable, Jesus the Good Samaritan pays all the costs. In the parable, it was with cold hard cash. On the cross, it was with His blood. "By His wounds we are healed."

So, cast yourself as that man lying half dead in the road. And see Jesus in the Samaritan kneeling beside you with such tenderness and care.

This story was prompted by a question from a young man who lived 2,000 years ago. "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" The lawyer wanted to save himself. So, Jesus told a story about a person who could not save himself. And so, it's an ancient story that quickly becomes your story and mine. Jesus wants us to stop trying so hard to save ourselves and simply receive God's extravagant love in Christ, who has done all the work and paid all the costs for our salvation. Rest in that grace. Then go and share it with your neighbors. Amen.