



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Who is My Neighbour?

Luke 10:25-37

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What's a "Samaritan"? I asked this question to a non-Christian friend this week and he said that a Samaritan is someone who helps people in need. I thought his answer was interesting, because it illustrates how a story can become so well known that we actually lose the meaning. Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan is one of those stories. We know it so well that we've actually redefined what a "Samaritan" is and as we've forgotten who the Samaritan really was, we've stripped Jesus' kingdom teaching from the story and turned it into nothing more than a morality play. Sometimes we even lose that.

I was thinking this week of a trip my family took when I was in Second Grade. We were in southern Oregon, on the way home from my grandparents' house, when the rear axle on our station wagon broke. My dad pulled over and when he realised that there was nothing he could do, he started walking for the nearest house to use their phone. He left my mom, my sister, and me in the car. It was the first time I'd ever paid attention to the RV's with the "Good Sam Club" sticker on the back—you know the one with the man with the halo. Wasn't that a club for people who stopped to help people in trouble? "Good Sam" after "Good Sam" cruised right past us while we were sitting there. Eventually two angels did stop to help. But they weren't *that* kind of angel. They were the "Hell's" biker variety and we were more than a little nervous. Were they really stopping to help or did they just see our fish sticker and stop to harass a poor Christian family in trouble? As it turned out, they really did stop to help

and since there was nothing they could do, the bikers rode on to the closest town and sent a tow-truck to pick us up. The "Samaritans" passed us by, but the Hell's Angels showed us mercy.

I remember thinking that Hell's Angels are supposed to be bad people. We—the Christian family with the fish sticker—certainly wouldn't have stopped to help them if the situation had been reversed. That was a boundary we never would have crossed. Those were people who deliberately identified themselves as not just outside, but opposed to Jesus' kingdom, but there they were showing us mercy. We were confronted that day by Jesus' question in Luke 10:36: "Which of these proved to be a neighbour to this man?"

Jesus tells his parable of the Good Samaritan to a man who confronted him as he was teaching his disciples about the kingdom. The teaching we saw him giving last week is full of messianic overtones and Jesus told his disciples how blessed they were to have been given understanding and knowledge of the kingdom. In contrast, the political and religious leaders just couldn't understand what Jesus was saying and doing—it was upside-down and it didn't fit with their expectations or even with their values. And now one of those religious leaders chimes in. Look at Luke 10:25.

And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"

Remember that in Jesus' day a lawyer was as much Bible scholar as legal expert. It was common for off-duty priests to take up "law". What this man asks is a standard rabbinic question and it had a standard rabbinic answer—not all that different from the questions and answers in our Catechism. He was asking to see if Jesus would give the "right" answer, but he almost certainly expected Jesus to expose himself as a heretic.

Specifically, the lawyer's question gets at the issue of boundaries. He's noticed that Jesus doesn't seem to pay much attention to boundaries and that's troubling this man. It's especially troubling for him because Jesus is also claiming to be the Messiah and if anyone should know about boundaries the Messiah should. Remember that the hope of the Jews was for the day at the end of history when the Messiah would come to establish his eternal kingdom, vindicate his faithful people, and condemn everyone else to everlasting damnation. And the Jews believed that when the Messiah came, he'd recognise his people by their faithfulness to the law and all of its boundaries. As far as this man is concerned, Jesus is being very *un-Messiah-like*. Again, Jesus isn't observing boundaries; he's crossing them. In fact, he's actually inviting people on the outside to come to the inside and he's forgiving sins all on his own, bypassing the temple and the priests and the whole sacrificial system. So he asks this question in an attempt to expose Jesus.

But Jesus throws the question right back at him. Look at verses 26-27:

He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" And he answered, "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."

Jesus sees the trap. He knows that what the lawyer is really asking is "Who's in and who's out?" And Jesus invites him to give the standard rabbinic answer. The lawyer responds with part of what the Jews call the *Shema*. *Shema* is the Hebrew for "Hear", the first word of Deuteronomy 6:4: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one." The rest of the *Shema* sums up the law with these words that we're familiar with from

our own liturgy. They sum up the law as love of God and love of neighbour.

And now, probably to the surprise and frustration of the lawyer, Jesus gives a completely uncontroversial answer. The lawyer came looking either for heresy or an argument and instead Jesus simply agrees with him and says:

“You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.” (Luke 10:28)

Love God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind and love your neighbour as yourself and God will recognise you as his own when he comes to establish his kingdom. But that’s not enough for the lawyer. He can’t go away until he’s exposed Jesus. You see, the lawyer is a good Jew because he—so to speak—colours inside the lines. He observes the boundaries. But he knows—he’s seen and he’s heard—how Jesus has defined his ministry by colouring outside the lines and if there’s anything that will expose where Jesus is wrong, it’s this issue of neighbours. Look at verse 29:

But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

The lawyer knows that he’s got one understanding of boundaries and Jesus has another. He wants to justify his own understanding of the boundaries and asking who is neighbour is the best way to do that. He believed that the law that God gave through Moses set the boundaries of Israel—things like circumcision, diet, sacrifices and temple. These things defined who was an insider and who was an outsider and never should the two meet. An outsider—someone who didn’t observe the law—could never be your neighbour because associating with him, coming into contact with his impurity and eating his unclean food would leave you impure and

unclean—and an outsider. That was the Jewish understanding of things.

But Jesus is preaching a very different take on God’s kingdom and people. Going back to the beginning, God had promised to make Abraham and his seed a blessing to the nations. He’d given them the law to help them to be a light to the gentiles. But instead of carrying that light to the nations, Israel kept it to herself. Instead of taking God’s blessings and his law to the world, Israel used it to draw a boundary around herself and to keep everyone else out. Worse than that, while the Jews hunkered down inside their boundaries, they then prayed for the day when God would come and destroy all the evil people on the outside. Israel completely forgot her mission. If Jesus’ idea of God’s kingdom seemed upside-down, it’s because the Jews had already had it backwards. Jesus has now come and picked up the mission. He’s become a kind of one-man Israel and he’s taking the blessing and light of God to everyone. And that’s why the lawyer is upset. He’s still operating in the old framework. As far as he’s concerned, the law is for Israel and thus the neighbours he’s supposed to love are other Israelites. The lawyer believes that in loving non-Jews, Jesus is taking the law where it shouldn’t be taken—he’s casting God’s pearls before gentile swine. So he tries to catch Jesus doing this by asking who his neighbour is—by asking whom he’s obligated to love. And in response Jesus tells a brilliant story that cuts right through the lawyer’s objections.

Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead.” (Luke 10:29)

Notice that Jesus never says anything about this man. He could be *anyone*. That’s part of Jesus’ genius when it

comes to storytelling. And the lawyer and everyone else around Jesus had probably taken the windy road between Jerusalem and Jericho. They can picture just the place Jesus is talking about. The fastest route from Galilee to Jerusalem was through Samaria, but as I’ve said before, that was a route most Jews didn’t take. It meant going through territory and associating with people that were often hostile, sometimes violent, and that the Jews considered unclean. Most people would take a longer route, travelling down to the Jordan valley in the east, going all the way down to Jericho in the south, and then going back northwest to Jerusalem. Jericho is well below sea level and Jerusalem is almost 900 metres up in the mountains. This was a windy mountain road and by all accounts it could be a dangerous route to travel alone. At this point the lawyer’s thinking, “I’ve been on that road lots of times. That could be me lying in the ditch half-dead.”

“Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.” (Luke 10:31-32)

Imagine you’re the man in the ditch. There you are almost dead, unable to move or even to cry for help, but a priest comes down the road. Surely one of the men who acts as a go-between between the Lord and his people will stop and help if only he sees you. Ah! The priest looks this way. He’s seen you. And...instead of coming over to help he crosses to the other side of the road and hurries on his way. A while later a Levite comes along. You get your hopes up again. He might not be a priest, but he’s still one of the men who work for the Lord. And...he crosses to the other side of the road too—passing by with as much distance as possible. Of all the people in Israel you’d expect to help, these two have passed by without even

checking first to see if you're alive or dead.

In their defence, they'd no doubt tell you that they couldn't tell whether you were alive or dead. Each of them was on his way to do his work as a priest or as a Levite and were they to roll you over to check to see if you were alive and then you turned out to be dead, they'd be unclean and unable to do their important work. Both men would appeal to the law in their defence. It's not that they didn't feel sorry for you. It's not that they didn't want to help. They just couldn't, because doing so might keep them from doing the very important things they had to do for the Lord.

But more than anything else, Jesus is condemning the role the priests and Levites had taken in Jewish society. A lot of people would have had no problem with the priest and Levite leaving the man for dead. Priests and Levites inherited their roles based on ancestry and tribal membership. Their status came not from what they did, but from their connection with the temple. They were the ultimate "insiders" and they weren't used to being questioned. And so a lot of people would have thought that what the priest and the Levite did in the story was actually a good thing—if for no other reason than that you didn't question what priests or Levites did. They weren't above reproach because of what they did; they were above reproach because of the status they had by birth.

And so the lawyer—since there's a good possibility that he was himself an off-duty priest—probably felt Jesus putting the pressure on him. The lawyer knew the law. He knew that God's call to love your neighbour was a higher priority than keeping purity laws. But it's not so bad, he'd be thinking. Someone else was going to come along. Jesus was telling the story according to a formula and he

knew what to expect next. The dying man would be okay.

Again, this is where we see Jesus' genius as a storyteller. We have formulas like this too. If I tell you that a Catholic priest and a Protestant minister walked into a bar, you know the formula. It can't just be the two of them walking into a bar. Guys in jokes walk into bars in *threes*. And you also know who the third person in the joke is. If the first two are a priest and a minister, we all know that the third person has to be rabbi. That's the formula. Jesus isn't telling a joke, but he's following a similar formula. If the first two men were a priest and a Levite, the third was supposed to be an ordinary Jewish layman.¹ And there's the solution: A layman could help the man. He wouldn't have had any pressing ceremonial duties that would keep him from touching this man who might be dead. But that's not who Jesus introduces next, and Jesus' break with the formula drives home his point. Look at verses 33-35:

“But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’”

This traveller took the road to Jericho precisely because he wanted to avoid Samaria and Samaritans. They were compromisers. They worshipped at the wrong temple. They rejected most of the Scriptures. They were unclean. Samaritans were bad people. They were the enemy. And yet where the priest and the Levite passed by and refused to fulfil the law's obligation to

love one's neighbour, the Samaritan not only stopped to check on the man, but cleaned and dressed his wounds, took the man to an inn, and paid for his care. Jesus describes the Samaritan doing something completely over the top. Whereas the priest and Levite did nothing, the Samaritan does far more than anyone would ever ask or expect. Remember that the Samaritan is in hostile territory, but that doesn't keep him from stopping, from taking the time to go to an inn, or from putting himself in a vulnerable position with the innkeeper. He could have been taken advantage of or even attacked at any point. But instead of hurrying home, he stops to show mercy to a man who, by all rights, was his enemy.

Now Jesus drives his point home. To the lawyer he now asks:

“Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” And Jesus said to him, “You go, and do likewise.”

The lawyer was committed to boundaries. God's kingdom and God's love were for the people who were committed to his law. And yet Jesus gives him a picture of the danger of drawing boundaries around love. If that's the way we see God's law. If that's the way we interpret it and put it into practise, then the priest and the Levite did the right thing when they walked by. Jesus told the story so that the lawyer would put himself in the place of the man beaten by robbers and now he's telling him: “If you want to insist on those boundaries, you're a dead man. No one's going to stop to help you. But if you're willing to let that awful, no good, unclean Samaritan touch you, if you're willing to risk impurity yourself, you'll live.” And here we see the kingdom. The parable isn't just a morality play about helping people in need. The parable is a picture of a kingdom in which Jesus'

¹ Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1972), p. 204.

people understand that they've been blessed—we've been blessed—because through him, through the Messiah, God has revealed himself to us, he's forgiven and regenerated us, and he's given us his love—and in the process of all that he's given us life. And the first thing every one of us ought to notice as a result of God loving us in this way is that we never deserved it. We were dead in sin. We were rebels. We were Samaritans or Hells Angels of our own sort. But God loved us anyway, drew us to himself, and redeemed us. The second response we ought to have after that is a desire to carry his message of love and grace to all the other dead and rebellious people we know—to all the other Samaritans and all the other Hells Angels still living on the outside in darkness and sin.

This is just what God had done for the Jews. And he did it intending for them to go out in joy to share his love and redemption with the nations, but instead they used the Scriptures, they used his love-letter, to draw a boundary around themselves and they used it to condemn and damn everyone on the outside. I think back to that day when the Hells Angels stopped to help us on the side of the road and I think about all the times we make the same mistake Israel made. We have God's love and we have his forgiveness. Maybe we were born into Christian families. Maybe we've never known what it's like to be outsiders, and so we start thinking like the priest and Levite, that God loves us because of who we are. We forget that we were once sinners. We forget that it's only by God's grace that we're members of his kingdom. And instead of sharing Jesus with the world, we draw a Jesus-shaped boundary around ourselves and our church. God's love is inside. God's redemption is inside. We've got to keep ourselves pure and spotless from the sinful and unclean people on the outside. Someday Jesus will come back and he'll high-five all of us for

our faithfulness to him and for keeping ourselves “unspotted from the world” and all the outsiders will get their just comeuppance in hell.

But brothers and sisters, that's just the mistake Israel made and that Jesus came to correct. And it's just the mistake that blinded the majority of Israel to the Messiah when he came. It's just the sort of mistake that made outsiders of all those people who thought and who were convinced that they were on the inside of God's kingdom. Woe to us if we do the same. Brothers and sisters, if our faith, if the Scriptures, if the Creed, or even if Jesus himself ever becomes a reason for us to draw boundaries the way the Jews did. If those things ever become a reason to pat ourselves on the back for our faithfulness to God while abandoning dying sinners on the side of the spiritual road, we will have lost Jesus himself. If the Gospel ever becomes a reason to leave a sinner to die, condemning him to his fate lest we become unclean by contact with him, Jesus warns us in the parable that we'll turn out to be the ones left in the ditch on the Last Day. Friends, there is a boundary. There really is an inside and an outside. But the boundary has nothing to do with defining our neighbours. The point of the boundary isn't to keep us safe, it's not to keep people out. The boundary is there to show us who needs the love of God, who needs to hear that Jesus is Lord, and who needs to be drawn from the place of darkness and death into Jesus' kingdom of light and life.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, thank you for your love. Help us always to remember that all of us were once outsiders and that it is only by your undeserved grace that we are now part of your kingdom. Remind us never to take your kingdom boundaries as a mark of special privilege, but instead to see them as the front line in a battle with the enemy—a battle Jesus has already won. Give us the grace and the courage to cross the boundary and

to reach out in love to our neighbours on the outside. Send your Holy Spirit to work in their hearts that as we reach out, their eyes might be opened to the good news that Jesus is Lord and that through him you forgive our sins and make our hearts new. We ask this through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour. Amen.