

The Good Neighbor

Gospel of Luke 10:25-37, The Good Samaritan
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Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" 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." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him 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. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend." Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

Gospel of Luke 10:25-37

Chant the Shema

Listen O Israel. The Lord is our God, the Lord is One. You shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart and all of your soul and all of you might.

This prayer is from the sixth chapter of the Book of Deuteronomy, and is the central calling of the Jewish people. We hear the second half of it here in the Gospel of Luke as the first half of the central calling of the Christian community. The second half is, of course, the instruction to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Jesus says that these are greatest of all commandments: to love God with everything we have and love our neighbors as ourselves. And they are recounted in all three of the synoptic Gospels - Matthew, Mark and Luke - although this story of the Good Samaritan, is unique to the Gospel of Luke. It is the only instance of the three where Jesus tries to illustrate what he means by this most difficult charge.

It is interesting to note that the instruction that we are to: *love each other as ourselves* does not originate on the lips of Jesus, or even in the New Testament. It comes from, of all places, the Book of Leviticus Chapter 19, verse 18, in the Hebrew Bible; and is spoken by God. I say of all places, because Leviticus also features one of the main, albeit very few, references that is often used hurtfully to assert a

“biblical ban” on one particular brand of loving relationship....same-sex relationships. For, just one short chapter before God declares the exhortation to love each other as ourselves, God says to Moses that: “A man may not lie with another man as he lies with a woman.” It seems so incongruous that, just one short chapter after God tells Moses that we are to love each other we love ourselves; the root of our greatest Christian commandment, God tells Moses that @@@@! I say the root of our commandment, because the text is not exactly the same. In Leviticus, God says in Hebrew, because God of course speaks Hebrew, that we are to love our “fellow human beings” as we love ourselves. And that is close but no cigar to Jesus’ mandate – the mandate that we are to: love our “neighbors” as ourselves.

Why doesn’t Jesus just quote God? Why doesn’t Jesus just say we are to love all people as we love ourselves? Why does he say love your neighbor? Why a neighbor? What is a neighbor? It is frequently suggested that the word neighbor refers to all fellow human beings in need. But, why, then didn’t Jesus just say that we are to love **everyone** as we love ourselves? Why does tell us to love, specifically, our neighbor?

Actually, he doesn’t. Jesus does not say that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. We translate the word as neighbor, but in Koine Greek, which is the original language of the New Testament, there is no word for neighbor. As those of you who speak more than one language will know, sometimes there are words that have no direct translation, and so the translator has to make a call. And in the original text, the word that Jesus uses is not neighbor, but “near.” Any Greek person in the first century would have heard Jesus say “love the one *near* you as you love yourself.” And that is quite different from God’s dictate in Leviticus to love our *fellow human beings* as ourselves. For one thing, the concept of “neighbor” carries a lot of social baggage for us in this time and place. And one’s neighborhood is altogether clearly defined. It is rather subjectively determined. And second, loving the ones near us seems a particularly tall order. Because sometimes it is so much easier to love those who are....not so near. About whom we know little. With whom we share little. From whom we can remain anonymous and safe.

The one near us is, by definition, someone we know something about, and who knows something about us. A name. An address, or lack thereof. A lifestyle. A cultural heritage. A religious affiliation. A sexual preference. A personal flaw, or failing, or fracture. It’s much easier to love the ones who are anonymously strewn at a safe distance. Our hearts go out to the broken lives in Darfur, Sudan and the suffering war torn families in Iraq. Our hearts go out to the impoverished faces in Cuernavaca, Mexico and Calcutta, India. Our hearts go out to the struggling families in Appalachia and Afghanistan....Our hearts go out to the poor, and the sick, and the suffering, the imprisoned and the infirmed and the inflicted around the world. But for some reason, it seems much harder to have the

same level of compassion here at home; here within our neighborhoods. Maybe we know much too much about the ones who are near us to offer the same kind of blanket acceptance...the same brand of unconditional compassion...the same degree of unmitigated forgiveness that we are often willing to extend to the world, to the ones who live within our immediate sphere of direct responsibility. A neighbor...a near one...is often literally just too close for comfort.

But I think Jesus uses the word near, very intentionally. Because love is only possible when we know who it is that we are loving. Compassion may have a universal application, but love is very, very up close and personal. And as a result, it is very risky. For it requires that we act. It is interesting that Luke, arguably the best Greek in the New Testament, uses love as a noun only once in the entire Gospel. Love is almost exclusively used as a verb. Love requires that we get involved, and that requires proximity.

Now, all the folks in this story in Luke seem to defy popular expectation. In the first century context in which this story was written, the man stripped and beaten and left for dead was likely a man of some means. After all, he was worth robbing. And, it was a Samaritan, a veritable social outcast who stopped to help him. And it was two religious sorts, a priest and a Levite, who coldly and summarily passed by the dying man in the ditch. If this story were to be told in modern day Boston it would likely be about an investment portfolio manager robbed, stripped, beaten, and left for dead in Mission Hill or on Blue Hill Avenue until an undocumented Hispanic Samaritan from the projects stopped to help him/her get to a hospital, risking the cost of being caught and arrested in the process. This story points us to the Kingdom of God by tossing our social expectations on their heads. The privileged one is the victim. The marginalized one is the Savior. And the religious sorts turn away and cross over to the other side of the neighborhood. But apparently, this is how Jesus wants us to understand our calling in God's Kingdom...outside of the social structures and expectations of our comfort zones....and yet, up close and very personal.

Sometimes we are in a position of need, sometimes we are in a position to help. But the magic happens, the Spirit moves through us, the transformation bubbles and brews when we are in these positions outside of our elements, outside of our comfort zones, outside of our expectations, and outside of our control.

We have been taught to identify with the Samaritan in this story. After all, we call the story, the Good Samaritan. If we called it the Victimized Traveler, or the Coldhearted Clergy, we might have a different perspective. And I will remind us, that *Jesus* did not name this story the Good Samaritan, biblical interpreters did. So, the title of this tale aside, with whom do we, each of us, identify in this story? Actually, let me rephrase, with whom do we identify in this story *today*? I say that because

almost every time I read this story I identify with a different character. Sometimes I am stripped and beaten and in the ditch. Sometimes, although I am loath to admit it, I am crossing to the other side of the street, leaving my brother or sister to suffer in the ditch. Sometimes I am the one who stops to help. And sometimes, I fear, but I know nonetheless, that I am the one who put my sister or brother in the ditch to suffer...hopefully, not as viciously and egregiously as the robbers in this story, but I have caused my share of pain, most of which has been completely unintentionally (although I do remember an incident with Billy Peery and a banana bike...but I think the statute of limitations has me covered there). Anyway, sometimes, I fit all of these perspectives at once.

My life experience tells me that part of the meaning of this morning's passage is that we are each all of these characters at one time or another in our complex lives. Sometimes we are in more than one place at the same time. And so we are called in this story to be aware of who and whose we are. And to expect that our fortunes and our fractures, our joys and our sorrows, our calling in each moment of every day is totally fluid, for it is inextricably related and tied to the need of the one standing before us...the one *near* us. We are not always rich or poor, victims or victimizers, helpful or hurtful,....we are all of those things at one time or another, in one context or another, depending upon the neighbor standing before us. And it will only be when we can reconcile our power with our vulnerability, our fear with our freedom, we will have a shot at the Kingdom of Heaven....a shot at the eternal life that is dangled at the opening of this story as the ultimate reward.

You remember the question that opened this morning's passage from Luke: "Teacher, what must be done to inherit eternal life?" The answer, of course, depends entirely on the definition of eternal life. It is a bit like asking the very relative question, "What must be done to have success?" The answer, of course, is to succeed.

And so the myriad commentaries available on this passage generally define eternal life as "the kingdom of God," or "heaven," or "salvation," or some such otherworldly way. But I like Frederick Buechner's definition of eternal life in his thoroughly enlightening little theological dictionary, "Wishful Thinking." He says that eternal life is, "being with God as Jesus is with God, and being with each other as Jesus is with us." Hmmmm. Through this lens, eternal life sounds not only like our final destination, but also our imperative for living. Is eternal life where we want to go, or how we are to get there?

Read with Buechner's definition eternal life is both the journey and the destination. The beginning, the middle, and the end. And so Jesus answered the lawyer's question about eternal life, not with the passive proclamation, but with some specific marching orders. After the story of the Good Samaritan, Jesus ends by exhorting us to: "Go and do like wise." And so just as the answer to the question about

what must be done to have success, is, of course: succeed, so Jesus' answer to what must be done to inherit eternal life is: go and live as though life were eternal. That is, love with abandon. Respond to each other's need with all of our hearts and our souls and our might. Accept help from each other with abject humility and gratitude. Live without fear of the one who is near. For those relationships are the stuff of eternal life.

And so who is my neighbor? I think the answer is: the one for whom we live and love as though life were eternal.

Amen.

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