

“LIVING THE GOSPEL”

Pastor Becky Stephens

Scripture: Luke 10:25-37

How many times a day or a week do you hear the expression, "That person was being a 'Good Samaritan'?" Even news reporters use this term in their stories to describe someone who helps another out of a burning building, jumps in a lake to save someone who is drowning, or calls the police when they see someone breaking into a neighbor's home. "The Good Samaritan" has passed into folklore, and has succeeded in changing the meaning of the word "Samaritan" itself in modern English.

In Jesus' time, calling someone a "Good Samaritan," at least from a Jewish stand-point, would have been an oxymoron. There was no such thing, in their eyes. The hatred between the Jews and Samaritans had gone on for hundreds of years--and it's still reflected, tragically, in the smoldering tension between Israel and Palestine today. Both sides claim to be the true inheritors of the promises to Abraham and Moses; both sides regard themselves as the rightful possessors of the land. And they are always on the brink of war.

So, the parable of the Good Samaritan has indeed become a bit of a cliché; most of us think of a Good Samaritan as anyone who comes to the aid of anyone else. And don't get me wrong, this is a great thing!!! But Jesus' parable goes much deeper than this. It goes to the very heart of the Gospel itself and what it means to follow what Jesus called the "Greatest Commandment": "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind...And love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus said that "All the Law and the Prophets"--in other words, EVERYTHING--"hangs on these two commandments."

So, it is important for all of us to get to the meat of what Jesus is really talking about here if we are to live as Jesus has called us to live. In our Gospel Lesson for this morning, Jesus is on His way to Jerusalem. Jesus is on His way to His death, when He meets a lawyer who wants to know how to move toward life, or is at least testing to see if Jesus knows. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

And since this guy is a lawyer or an expert in Jewish religious law, Jesus turns the question around on him: "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" And the man quotes to Jesus what is written in Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18: "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, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" Jesus tells the lawyer that he has answered the question correctly. "Do this and you will live," Jesus tells him.

But then the lawyer has a follow-up question: "And who is my neighbor?" And we are told that the lawyer asked Jesus this question because he wanted to "justify himself." And in this context it means that the lawyer wanted to limit who rightly qualifies as his neighbor, to divide out exactly which people he is called to love.

In other words, the Law obviously couldn't be instructing this man that he must love people who are non-Jews. The Law must not be instructing this man that he must love people who are of a different race, or people who think differently than him, act differently, or worship differently. The Law certainly is not teaching this man to love his enemies. The Jews and the Samaritans were enemies, and the contempt was mutual. Jesus even experienced this contempt as a Jew.

In Luke Chapter 9 Jesus went into a Samaritan town that refused to welcome Jesus. And James and John wanted Jesus to call down fire from heaven and burn those terrible people up. But Jesus sharply reprimanded them!!! Violence and hatred is not what Jesus is about. Revenge is not what Jesus is about. We do well to remember this at all times, as those who seek to follow Jesus Christ.

Ever feel that natural urge to "get back at the so-and-so who cut you off in traffic"? Ever get that natural urge to "fight fire with fire", to give someone else "a taste of their own medicine"?

So, in order to paint the picture as to "who is my neighbor," Jesus tells this lawyer the famous parable of "The Good Samaritan." Which would have been an absolutely "shocking parable" to anyone listening in Jesus' day. There ain't no way a Samaritan is good!!! There ain't no way a Samaritan is my neighbor!!! There ain't no way I'm ever gonna love one of them!!!!

Who are the Samaritans of 21st Century America? Who would we be shocked to hear being put in the place of being the "good guy or girl" in this story? Who would we be shocked to hear Jesus say, "If you want to have eternal life go and do what that person did...go and do likewise?" Could be anyone couldn't it? Who is demonized in our

society? Who is the hated group? Who is on the fringes? Let's change the name of the parable for a minute and put their name there instead!!! It's the "Parable of the Good...."--you fill in the blank!!!

So Jesus tells the lawyer this parable. He doesn't explain why the priest and Levite-- these highly esteemed Jewish religious figures didn't stop to help one of their own people. The point seems to be that two people who presumably represent the identity and piety of the victim in the story don't express any concern toward him whatsoever. Each arrives on the scene, see the man, and pass on the other side. Nothing can excuse their refusal to reach out to him.

But, then, here comes the guy's enemy. He's got a lot of reasons not to help. But when the enemy saw the man, "he took pity on him." "He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him." The next day the Samaritan paid the innkeeper. "Look after him," he said, "and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have."

This Samaritan man was living eternal life then and there!!! And let's face it, it's hard to "live" the Gospel!!! It's hard to show Jesus' compassion to folks that we love, let alone folks we have been taught to hate!!! It takes time. It takes effort. It's not convenient.

I mean, don't you think that Samaritan had other places he needed to be? He wasn't travelling down that road for no reason!!! He probably had a busy schedule. His compassion for this dying enemy may have caused him to miss an important meeting. To do that for someone we know and like is hard enough, but to do that for a despised, good-for-nothing outcaste...well...

It's very telling when, at the end of the story Jesus asks the lawyer: "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" It's very telling that the expert in the law couldn't bring himself to say, "The Samaritan." -- let alone, "The Good Samaritan!!!"

Instead, he replied, probably mumbled under his breath: "The one who had mercy on him." I suppose that Samaritans were such a hated bunch that to even say their name aloud, or to say it in a positive tone would have been unheard of...disgusting...embarrassing...stomach turning...so socially unacceptable that he can't bring himself to do it. And Jesus, I imagine, looked at the lawyer with compassion as He instructed him, "Go and do likewise."

So the next time you hear a news reporter or a friend say that someone is being a "Good Samaritan," remember where this term comes from. Remember that it doesn't just mean helping someone in need...it goes much deeper than that...it means helping anyone in need...even our worst enemy!!!

Where in Jesus' story does anyone call the Samaritan Good? It really is: "The Parable of the man who loved the Lord his God with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his strength and with all his mind; and, 'Loved his neighbor as himself," is it not? It's the parable about living the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And the Gospel of Jesus Christ is radical. It is hard. And it brings us and others eternal life!!! Praise God, Praise God, Praise God!!! Amen.

Psalm 82 The Message

An Asaph Psalm 82

God calls the judges into his courtroom,
he puts all the judges in the dock.

²⁻⁴ "Enough! You've corrupted justice long enough,
you've let the wicked get away with murder.
You're here to defend the defenseless,
to make sure that underdogs get a fair break;
Your job is to stand up for the powerless,
and prosecute all those who exploit them."

⁵ Ignorant judges! Head-in-the-sand judges!
They haven't a clue to what's going on.
And now everything's falling apart,
the world's coming unglued.

⁶⁻⁷ "I commissioned you judges, each one of you,
deputies of the High God,
But you've betrayed your commission
and now you're stripped of your rank, busted."

⁸ O God, give them their just deserts!
You've got the whole world in your hands!

L: The Word of God, for the People of God.

P: Thanks be to God! Amen!