

IT TAKES MORE THAN A RIGHT ANSWER

Luke 10:25-37; 15th Sunday in Ordinary time, c
July 11, 2010

Stephen R. Montgomery
Idlewild Presbyterian Church

Prayer: O God, in the quiet of these precious moments together, come to us. Use our thinking and our singing and our praying as a means of your grace, opening our spirits to the astonishing miracle of your presence and your love. Use our words to communicate your word to us. And startle us with your truth in Jesus Christ. Amen.

It's my guess that our good friend, the Good Samaritan, is well known to all of us, even if this is the first time you have stepped into a church in many years. He has become a secularized saint. Hospitals, helping groups, civic awards, half-way homes, counseling centers are named after him. There is even a law in many states called the "Good Samaritan" law. Often, however, people don't know who he is or who introduced him into the literary world in the first place. This would make a great question for Jay Leno's Persons on the Street interviews. "Who told the story of the Good Samaritan?" Let's see, was it Shakespeare or Steven Spielberg?

To be a good Samaritan is shorthand for helping once a week at the local soup kitchen, going out of one's way at the Christmas season to see that the food baskets get delivered to the neediest people, sacrificing several Saturdays in a row to build a house for Habitat for Humanity, or giving a ride to someone who has had a flat tire.

There's nothing wrong with all of that, of course. We could use more of that. I don't know of any preachers who would be against that. As a matter of fact, most sermons that I have heard on this parable ended not a minute too soon as preachers have wagged their fingers and accused pews-full of bewildered Christians of bustling down the road not giving a hoot about the poor old soul in the ditch. So many times, guilt, like an ill-fitting shoe, has rubbed blisters on our consciences and all we can think about is getting to the inn and having the agony over with. This parable has led to a lot of guilt, and guilt trips are inevitably arduous affairs.

There are other problems with this parable. It is misnamed, for one thing. Just as the parable of the prodigal son is not really a parable about a prodigal son as much as it is of a forgiving father, this parable is really about the man on the ground left in the ditch to die. But I doubt if we could change the name of the Samaritan Counseling Center to "the man who fell among thieves counseling center." Such theological correctness might not go over well with both counselors and those seeking help.

But then there's the question I have struggled with as I have been living with this parable this week: With whom do I identify? With whom in this story do you identify? I have to admit that there have been times when I have felt like the one in the ditch—beaten, tired, ignored, passed over by people who could care less. But on the whole we have enough victimization in our society, and I wouldn't want to carry that too far.

At times I've been the Good Samaritan. I've done a few good deeds in my lifetime: have given rides to people who I hardly knew, but seemed down and out; and just this morning, early, at about 6:00, I went to Starbucks to get my Sunday cup of coffee, and there was one of our friends from More than a Meal. "Hey preacher. Hope you're having a blessed day," he said, but I knew what was coming. "Preacher, I got a job but it won't start until tonight...could you...?" What could I say? I was preaching on the Good Samaritan! Bought him some coffee and a doughnut.

But that only goes so far. I'm not despised by society like the Samaritan was. When it comes right down to it, I am in a position of privilege—white, male, middle-class, educated. Now if I were some sort of an outcast, say, an immigrant from Mexico walking down a street in Arizona, or a Muslim from Pakistan in most cities here, and maybe even a gay person walking down Appling Road, and did a good deed, then I could rightfully claim the Good Samaritan status.¹

Besides, I've all too many times been the one who passed by. So maybe it's the priest or the Levite that I identify with most closely. I can understand them. After all, they represented the religious establishment of their day. The priest was an intermediary between the people and God, a worship leader, one who communicated God's blessing to the people. The Levite was a temple assistant, by definition, one devoted to the Lord for service. These are my kinds of folks, so I don't want to be too hard on them. We forget because we have heard this story so much, that they were good people. No, really. *Good* people. Faithful to the Law. It would have been against the law for the priest to be near a dead person, and the victim might well have been dead, or close to it.

And there are so many reasons for not stopping. There's a man on the side of the road. His hood is up. He needs help. It's probably a set-up, a scam. I've heard about those, you know. Maybe there is someone hiding in the back seat. He needs help. I could give him a ride, but these days that's always risky. He needs help. Maybe I should go over to the service station nearby and let the mechanic know. But suppose he can't afford a mechanic. He needs help. And besides, I've got to go do some research on the Good Samaritan.

There's a good bit of priest *and* Levite in me. But the person that hits closest to home for me, (and I think some of you lawyers might find this surprising!) is the lawyer, the one who launched Jesus into telling this parable in the first place. He's got a well-trained mind, likes to think. Logical. He's concerned with doing the right thing. He apparently has been following Jesus around, and he's intrigued. I'm intrigued with Jesus, still trying to figure him out. I don't think he was trying to trick Jesus into any answer, like the Pharisees often did. I think he just might be a person hungry for God, and who sincerely wishes to know what the life of faith might require of him.

"What must I do to inherit eternal life?" he asks Jesus. Now for some people, then and now, eternal life means heaven, the jackpot at the end of the rainbow. Not so for Jesus. Eternal life means hitting the jackpot NOW. A depth and breadth and sweetness that is available right now and not only after we have breathed our last.² But how do you get that? The lawyer wants to know. I want to know.

Jesus, good rabbi that he was, answered the question with a question: “What does the law say?” Ah, thinks the lawyer. Back on my turf. He answers beautifully. Knew it by heart. “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.”

Beautiful answer. Profound. True. Right. And Jesus lets him know. “You’ve given the right answer. Do this and you will live.”

“Gulp.” The lawyer gulps because he realizes it is not enough just to give the right answer. “You have given the right *answer*. *DO* this.” You got it right. You said it very well. Now just go and do it.

He gulps because he knows how impossible such a “doing” would be. He thinks about the needs of all of those he comes into contact with. He thinks about all the people he passes to and from his way to work, all the people sitting on steps and sleeping on sidewalks and drinking in doorways. He reads the morning papers and knows the hurts of the world. He gets to the office and reads all the requests that come in the morning mail asking for contributions for everything from prisoners of conscience to handicapped veterans to abused children to refugees, to cancer victims. He thinks about all the poor that need free legal advice. And he thinks of his own family responsibilities as well. No way I can love all of them, he thinks. And he gulps.

Do this and you will live? Do this and you will die, of physical, emotional, and economic exhaustion!³ So the good lawyer does what any good lawyer would do. He brings the discussion around to his own turf. “Safe territory.” Tries to think it through. He wants Jesus to define the terms. Maybe there is an “out” there, a loophole. “And who is my neighbor?”

One can only speculate as to what kind of answer he expected. “A neighbor (hereinafter referred to as the party of the first part) is to be construed as meaning a person of Jewish descent whose legal residence is within a radius of no more than three statute miles from one’s own legal residence unless there is another person of Jewish descent (hereinafter to be referred to as the party of the second part) living closer to the party of the first part than one is oneself, in which case the party of the second part is to be construed as neighbor to the party of the first part and one is oneself relieved of all responsibility of any sort or kind whatsoever.”⁴

Whatever he expected, what he was getting at was “Who is NOT my neighbor? Whom may I legitimately leave outside my circle of concern and still feel good about myself?” He wants to explore this with Jesus, poke holes in it until it becomes so complicated that he is absolved of any responsibility and he can go home with a clear conscience.

That is me to a tee. How about you? Haven’t you ever stalled for time simply by making things complicated so that you can finally throw up your hands and blame your failure to act on the lousy directions? “Gosh, we really ought to do more to help those who are homeless,” I think. And so I get together with a friend, a compassion type, and we’ll start stacking up all the reasons why we can’t do anything about it. It really is an insoluble problem. There’s addiction, mental illness, war veterans, illiteracy, high unemployment, little low-cost housing, and on and on. So what is one person, or two, or even a church to do? It makes it difficult to move, to act, to do.

Some of you know that our General Assembly of our denomination is ending today. One report they studied was a 150 page report on the Israel/Palestine crisis. 150 pages of history, Bible, politics, facts, stories, reflections, studies of studies. Very complicated. And after reading it we get the feeling that now we can talk about it quite intelligently. But *doing* something about it?

I wonder if all that paper and trees, not to mention the time and energy that went into such a report might have been saved if the report would have simply asked the question: “Who is my neighbor?” The answer, of course, would be “The Palestinian is my neighbor.” “The Israeli is my neighbor.” “The Muslim is my neighbor.”

I wonder how the immigration issue might be resolved if the politics were removed from it and all discussions about it began with the question “Who is my neighbor?” And whenever we strayed from that question we would keep coming back to it: “Who is my neighbor?”

Sometimes we complicate things too much. Kathleen Norris reported a true story in her book *Amazing Grace*—about a Croatian of Serbian descent, a Christian who was in charge of managing a refugee resettlement for a part of Croatia. Working on plans to rebuild a Muslim village that had been totally destroyed in the war, the man found, to his surprise, that no mosque had been included. When he inquired about it, the mayor told him he had assumed that Christian organizations would not be willing to help fund the rebuilding of a mosque. The relief worker replied that it was because they were followers of Jesus Christ that they would help rebuild it. “Jesus told a story about a good Samaritan,” he said, “who helped his neighbor without asking him about his theology.”⁵

Jesus will not cooperate with the lawyer who wants to talk about love, and what the limits are, and how you really can’t *always* be loving and compassionate. Jesus knows that the last thing in the world the lawyer needs is a good *discussion* on neighborliness, or a little more understanding. So he just tells a story that you know about how it does not matter what we think, understand, know, feel, or say about love, but what we *do* about love that brings us life.

“Which of these was the neighbor to the fallen man?” It’s a set-up, of course. There’s only one correct answer, and of course, the lawyer gets it right—again. “The one who showed him mercy.”

“You’re right,” Jesus says. Go and *do* likewise. *Do* this, and you will live.”

Now don’t get me wrong. This sermon is not about doing more, or about feeling guilty if you do not. It is a sermon about not confusing the knowing, understanding, feeling, thinking, or saying of love, with the *doing* of love. Those are all fine activities, but only one of them leads to eternal life, according to this story. Only one of them leads to the fullness of life which can begin right here, right now.⁶

So love God. Love your neighbor. Don’t complicate things by arguing about the specifics. And remember that having the right answer isn’t enough. I think most of us know what it is to do love because at some time or another we have been on the receiving end of it.

And when you don't know what it looks like, ask yourself: Who shows mercy on us? Who picks us up when we are wounded? Who shows us excessive love that it beyond the boundaries of propriety? Who comes to help while being oppressed and persecuted? Who gives us a love so powerful that our wounds are bound and healed, and takes responsibility for all the care we need? Who loves us so unconditionally that we can't talk back, but can only go and do likewise?

Beloved, the Samaritan is Jesus Christ himself.

Amen.

© 2010 Idlewild Presbyterian Church, Memphis, Tennessee

¹ Appling Road is the home of a mega-church in Memphis that recently made news because they kicked a coach off one of their softball teams because she was a lesbian.

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*, Cambridge, Cowley Publications, 1993, p. 116. I am indebted to Taylor's sermon for the general theme of this sermon, as well as some specifics.

³ Ibid. p. 117.

⁴ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*; New York: Harper and Row, 1973, p. 65-66.

⁵ Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace*, p. 356.

⁶ Taylor, op.cit., p. 120.

Luke 25:10–37

25 Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” **26** He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” **27** 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.” **28** And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.” **29** But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” **30** 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. **31** Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. **32** So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. **33** But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. **34** 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. **35** 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.” **36** Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” **37** He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”