

The Good Samaritan

Luke 10:25-37

The term ‘Good Samaritan’ should be fairly familiar to all of us. When you Google the term ‘Good Samaritan Hospital’ you get 1,460,000 hits. Even if you are not familiar with today’s scripture reference to this term, it’s pretty popular. We use it to describe each other when one of us does something nice for someone else – we call that person a ‘Good Samaritan.’ But what makes this person so special? Is it because he did something nice for someone else? Everyone does that at some point. What makes this story special has a lot to do with the background between Samaritans and Hebrews.

To start off today I’d like to show some images of paintings done over the years to depict this story. [Slide Show] The familiar scene is the one where the Samaritan is cleaning the man’s wounds. He is literally going out of his way to help his

‘neighbor.’ But if you read the text closely you’ll see some interesting points in this story. First, the man who was robbed was coming from Jerusalem to Jericho. It is highly likely this man was a Judean and not a Samaritan. However, because he was stripped and beaten, assuming he cannot speak, no one can tell his nationality by his clothing or his accent – these were the popular ways to identify people at this time. So here is the first interesting fact – the wounded man was probably a Jew.

The next interesting part involves the priest and the Levite who both do nothing to help this man and go so far as to pass by on the other side of the road. The priest was one who enforced the law – particularly the cleanliness laws. For a priest to touch a man who was half dead meant he would have to return to Jerusalem to be cleansed. He just came from Jerusalem, probably performing rituals to help others become ‘clean’ again.

To have to return himself to be cleansed would be too embarrassing. The Levite came next and it is very possible he saw the actions of the priest. A Levite was a high holy man of the descendents of Aaron. He too would be concerned with cleanliness, but also of the actions of the priest. It could possibly dishonor the priest if the Levite took action when the priest did not. So out of honor, the Levite passed by as well.

I have heard horror stories of people literally bleeding to death in public places because no one would take action and help to save that person's life. One case was broadcast over the internet where a camera mounted on a building captured this man who was attacked and laid in a gutter literally for hours while numerous people passed him by and didn't even approach him to see if he was alright. The man died after laying there for approximately 13 hours.

I have also heard of cases where people risk their lives, and often lose their lives to save the lives of others. During the San Francisco earthquake a few years back, news cameras caught pictures of people who were climbing back into buildings after they had gotten out to help others to safety. There was a story of a woman whose house was suddenly flooded in the Tennessee floods when the reservoir water was released. A man came by on a jet ski to help save her, her friend and her dogs, just seconds before an explosion completely demolished her home. She called him 'her angel on a jet ski!' Helping strangers is definitely going out of one's way to be a Good Samaritan.

But the story has more layers than a person helping a stranger in need. Samaritans and Jews were historic enemies. Their history goes way back to the time when the Jews were exiled into Babylon. Heathen enemies conquered Jerusalem and

destroyed the temple built by King Solomon. The Hebrews were sent away into exile, except for the very poor and destitute. They were allowed to remain in the city and many probably became servants of the conquerors. Years later, the Kingdom was restored and the Hebrews were allowed to return. Obviously, the worship practices were very different between these two groups – those who stayed and those who left and then returned. The returning Hebrews saw themselves as the true children of Israel and held great disdain for those who stayed behind – those later referred to as Samaritans.

So this story brings in a character that was totally unexpected by the lawyer who issued the challenge to Jesus. Obviously he would have wanted a character like himself that would be the hero, but instead Jesus brings in a scorned, long-time enemy – a Samaritan. No upstanding Jew would ever see a

Samaritan as good. So the real challenge presented by Jesus is this – can we love and care for our true, gut-wrenching enemies? It is bad enough to have to forgive them but to go out of our way to extend aid to an enemy in need – that is almost too much.

Nevertheless, that is exactly what Jesus presents to us as a model to follow. The Samaritan not only had pity on this man who was his potential enemy, but he most certainly goes the extra mile. He served as a road-side physician providing on-the-spot first aid. He then put the man on his animal and chose to walk while allowing the hurt man to ride. He put the man up at an inn with his own money, and even promised to pay whatever else is needed when he returns. And if that is not enough, it is fairly clear the man literally went out of his way. He wasn't planning to stay at the inn – he was still traveling, possibly a different way.

There is an old proverb that says we are not to judge someone until we have walked a mile in his moccasins. There is another charge from Jesus in the book of Matthew that says if a man asks you to walk a mile with him, go two miles instead. This Samaritan had every right to sit in a seat of judgment just as the priest and Levite had. The risk was great for him since it is highly likely the wounded man was an arch enemy. None of that mattered when someone was in need of basic service to help save his life.

John Wesley presented three basic principles for living out a Christian life. First we are to do no harm – this is exactly the same initial principle for physicians in their Hippocratic oath. We are not to make things worse by our actions. Providing aid to someone in need is one of those things seen as preventing harm if one neglected to act. The second principle is to do good

– that’s it. Do good – do all the good that you can. That includes reaching out to people in need regardless of their ability to pay you back; regardless of their skin color or status; regardless of their political affiliation. Methodism is earmarked by the union of helping people with their physical and spiritual needs. You cannot share the gospel with someone who needs a loaf of bread unless you bring the loaf of bread with you.

The final principle for us to live Christian lives is to stay in love with God. The lawyer that presented the challenge to Jesus was not interested in his relationship with God and neighbor even though he stated correctly the fact that we are to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength; and we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. The question presented by the lawyer was, ‘who is my neighbor?’ The counter-question presented by Jesus was, ‘who became the neighbor?’ The message to us is

that we are to become a neighbor to anyone in need. Now, there are a variety of neighbors. There are the nosy neighbors, the noisy neighbors, the angry neighbors, the abusive neighbors, and at times there are the good neighbors. We always remember our good neighbors. They are the ones that step in and help even before you have to ask. They are the ones that ask, ‘how are you?’ and really mean it. We are to become the good neighbors.

The last few sermons seem to be fitting together with this similar message. Two weeks ago I introduced the book, In His Steps, where a pastor challenged his congregation with the phrase, “What would Jesus do?” I also issued a challenge for us to pray for each other using the church directory. Last week we celebrated our Independence Day by revisiting our mission and vision for Mount Tabor with the overall goal of helping members of our community, our neighbors, find a personal

relationship with Jesus Christ. If I didn't know better I'd say we've worked through our first sermon series! The message is clear – love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and love our neighbor as ourselves. As the song says, “They will know we are Christians by our love.” Amen.