

WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?

Luke 10: 25-37

The Parable of the Good Samaritan is one of the most famous in Scripture. Even people who don't know much about Christianity and the Bible seem to know the story of the good man who takes care of the man who was beaten up and left for dead. Our courts speak about the "Good Samaritan clause" which protects people who try to help others. Hospitals and nursing homes have been given the name "Good Samaritan." The idea is that people should help other people like the Good Samaritan did.

There has been a lot of emphasis in our society in recent years on that idea. Companies have found that they can actually increase productivity if everyone helps each other instead of executives simply bossing around those under them. This has become more apparent in light of the pandemic as companies have learned that "performance management" (what you get done) is more important than "time management" (the time you spend at work). Isn't that just in with what Jesus is saying? If I am nice and helpful to people around me, then won't they be more likely to be nice and helpful to me in return?

Two men named Bill Morse lived in the same small town in Iowa. One man worked in sales for a larger company; the other was a lawyer. One week the Bill Morse who worked for the big company was attending a sales meeting in Phoenix in July. July in Phoenix makes our recent heat feel like a cold front—120 in the shade. He sent a note home to his wife about it, addressing it, "Mrs. Bill Morse". Meanwhile the other Bill Morse, the lawyer, died. After a big funeral, the family who came to help his wife grieve for several days left her alone. Meanwhile the note from Bill Morse in Phoenix came to her, not the real wife. The note read, "Honey, the heat down here is tremendous."

That's what happens when the right information gets put in the wrong place. We hear the story of the Good Samaritan, but we can easily take it out of context. Jesus is teaching when an expert in the law asked a question to test Him. The man was not trying so much to learn from Jesus as to get Him to say a gaff, much like news reporters today are often more interested in getting a sound byte from a politician that will make the news rather than really learn from the politicians. He asked Jesus, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus answered him, "What is written in the law? How do you read it?" The man answered, "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 told him, "You have answered correctly. Do this and you will live." But Luke tells us the man wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?"

It is in that context that Jesus tells the parable. He is answering the question, "Who is my neighbor?" So what answer does the story leave us with?

In the story a man is robbed, beaten, and left to die on his way from Jerusalem to Jericho. Jericho is only about 10 miles from Jerusalem as the crow flies, but you actually go from about

3,000 ft in Jerusalem to minus 1500 in Jericho, near the lowest point on earth. The road winds and twists down a rugged country aptly called “The Wilderness of Judea.” There are no plants there, just rocks and dust and a place you don’t want to be left in, especially half-dead. A priest walks by the man. He knows that if he touches a dead body, he will become unclean and unable to do his work. Likewise, a Levite, someone who helped in the temple functions, passed by. But the Samaritan stops and helps the man. He gives him something to drink, bandages his wounds, puts him on a donkey and carries him to Jericho. He puts him in an inn and pays the innkeeper extra to make sure the man is taken care of. He does all this—and he is a Samaritan!

Samaria lies in the middle of Israel between Judea in the south and Galilee in the north. Good Jews didn’t go there. Why? Samaria was made up of people left over from the ten “lost tribes” of Israel. After the death of King Solomon, the son of David, the nation of Israel divided into two. The ten northern tribes were called “Israel” or “Samaria” after their capital city. The two tribes in the south were called “Judah” or “Jerusalem” after their capital. The kings in the north had a problem. People from the north kept going south to Jerusalem to worship God in the temple. So the kings made sites in the north to worship God. But they actually became places of idol worship. The northern kingdom grew so wicked that God allowed the Assyrians to wipe them out. The southern kingdom fell later to the Babylonians, but God allowed people from there to return and rebuild the temple at Jerusalem. Meanwhile the Assyrians had resettled the Samaritan land with pagans from other parts of their empire. They, along with the few remnants of the northern kingdom, did all they could to make life difficult for the people of Judah who had returned from captivity in Babylon. We can read about that in Nehemiah. These Samaritans still exist in Israel. They believe in the God of the Jews, but feel that Mt. Gerazim, not Jerusalem, is the holy place to worship God. Many Jews of Jesus’ time saw them as worse than the Gentiles. At least the Gentiles were ignorant. But they saw the Samaritans as those who had rejected God, caused problems for all Israelites by their idolatry, and were traitors to the faith.

Yet, a Samaritan was the real neighbor to this man, a Jew. A Samaritan helped a Jew, his sworn enemy. Jesus’ answer is telling us that to love our neighbor means that we have to love all people, even and especially our enemies. When the man told Jesus, quoting from the Old Testament, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” he, like many Jews, interpreted “neighbor” to mean his fellow Jew, his brother. But Jesus is telling us we are to love the terrorist, the drunk who flies past a stop sign and hits our car, the idiot who flips us off, the kid at school who makes everyone angry, and the boss who is unfair. With His story Jesus was taking the man’s carefully built approach to salvation and knocking it down.

And He does this with anything we try to build in place of God’s love to us. The man asked Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” If we inherit eternal life, there is nothing we can do. It isn’t something we earn or do, it is something given to us. Jesus said in Holy Communion, “This cup is the New Testament in my blood.” He was giving His last will and testament. We receive forgiveness and eternal life simply because He offered that to us by His death on the cross. We don’t love our neighbor as ourselves. But Jesus did. He loved you, me, and everyone, despite the fact that by our sin we were His enemies.

“What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Nothing. But we can love the Lord our God and our neighbor as ourselves, not to inherit life, but to live as Jesus said, “Do this and you will live.” Jesus wasn’t talking about what we do get eternal life, but what we do because we have eternal life in Him. When we are free from having to earn our way to heaven, then we can love. If I am nice to others so they will be nice to me, that is essentially selfish. But if I love because God loves me, then I am not focused on me, but God. Then I am free to love my neighbor.

Who is my neighbor? Jesus Christ became your neighbor and mine. We can now be neighbors to others.