

The parable of the Good Samaritan is one of the most familiar stories Jesus told, -- so familiar, that even non-church-goers can usually tell the story. So familiar that the phrase, “a good Samaritan,” has become a common term of speech, -- referring to a do-gooder who has gone out of his way to help another person.

So, it may come as a surprise to hear that of all the parables Jesus told, - this was one of the ones that Jesus’ contemporaries found the most difficult. For the words “good” and “Samaritan” simply didn’t go together.

Jews and Samaritans had a deep hatred for each other. Samaria was a region north of Jerusalem, sandwiched in between Judea to the south and Galilee to the north.

The people of Samaria had intermarried with the Assyrians after the Assyrian army conquered the northern kingdom of Israel in the 700’s B.C. When the southern kingdom of Judea returned from the Babylonian exile a couple of hundred years later, they found that the Samaritans were so ethnically mixed and so different in their religious practices, that the Judeans refused to allow the Samaritans to help them re-build the temple in Jerusalem.

So the Samaritans built a rival temple on Mount Gerizim in Samaria.

The animosity between the Jews and Samaritans continued to grow, and by the time of Jesus, the two groups refused to have anything to do with each other. Jews considered Samaritans unclean/non-kosher and wouldn’t sit at the same table with them. Both groups refused to speak to each other and avoided going into each other’s territory.

And then - something really horrific happened.

About 20 years before Jesus would have told this parable, a group of Samaritans had snuck into the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem -- right before Passover, and had scattered human bones all around the Temple area, -thereby defiling the Temple, and preventing the celebration of Passover.

The depth of hostility between the two groups had reached its highest point.

Jesus could not have used a more shocking character in his story than a “good” Samaritan. *(If Jesus were telling the parable today, he might have used a “good” radical Muslim, or a “good” neo-Nazi militia member. It was simply hard to fathom a “good” Samaritan. The two words didn’t go together.)*

Our scripture lesson, however, doesn’t begin with the good Samaritan, but with a lawyer. -A lawyer who wants to “test” Jesus. Perhaps this lawyer is trying to trip up

Jesus with his questions, -or prove that Jesus doesn't know the law as well as he does.

Now "lawyers" at that time were not secular lawyers as we think of them, but experts in the law of Moses and its religious interpretation. And so, to test Jesus, the lawyer asks him, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

But Jesus throws the question back on him. "You know the law. What does it say?"

And the lawyer replies with a well-known summary of the Jewish law, combining a verse from Deuteronomy with a verse from Leviticus: "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 you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

"That's it," Jesus replies. "Do those two things and you will live; - you will experience life that is eternal, - a life lived in the fullness of God."

But the lawyer is a practical man and wants a more precise answer. He wants to be able to measure how well he's keeping the law. -After all, the instruction to "Love one's neighbor" is rather vague.

So he does what any good lawyer would do: he asks Jesus to define the terms. "And who is my neighbor?"

Of course, what he's really asking is, 'Who is not my neighbor?' "I need to be able to set some boundaries, -to limit the circle," the lawyer is thinking, "There's no

practical way I can love everybody. Who can I legitimately set outside my concern?"

Jesus, however, resists defining the word, "neighbor." Instead, he tells a story.

Now we've heard the story so often -we know how it ends--- so we call it the story of the Good Samaritan. But pretend you've never heard it before; --pretend, like the lawyer, you're about to hear it for the first time.

The story begins, "There once was a man - going down the road *from Jerusalem to Jericho* . . ." The main character in the story is actually the man, - the traveler, - the one who ends up being beaten and robbed. That's who Jesus wants the lawyer -and the audience -to identify with. ---To feel his physical pain, -to sense his terror at being left on the side of the road -close to death.

"There once was a man - going down the road *from Jerusalem to Jericho* . . ." Jesus' listeners would have immediately formed a mental picture. This road was notoriously dangerous. It descended 3,300 feet in just 17 miles -It was steep and rocky, -with lots of narrow passes. Not only were there wild animals, but robbers and bandits were common; they had numerous hiding places -in caves

or behind rocks, and were just waiting to overpower a solitary traveler.

“There once was a man - going down the road *from Jerusalem to Jericho* . . .” When sure enough, robbers jump him, beat him up, strip him and rob him, and leave him , half-dead, lying in the road.

“By chance,” Jesus continues, “a priest was going down the road.”

-Now, if you’re identifying with the injured man, -when you hear footsteps approaching, you’re not sure whether to feel hopeful or fearful. But you raise your head just enough to see that it’s a priest coming. Good, you think, he’ll stop and help me.

But no, - he catches sight of you, then crosses to the other side of the road, and walks on by.

A short time later, you hear more footsteps. This time it’s a Levite, a member of the special family of temple workers. But he, too, sees you, and crosses to the other side of the road and passes by.

Why didn’t these two religious, and one would hope -- moral and ethical -- leaders, stop to help?

Didn’t they care? Well, we speculate, -perhaps they were in a hurry. -Temple duties to get to. - A church

meeting to attend. We can relate.

Or perhaps they were worried that if they touched you -the injured one, -they would become ritually unclean, and wouldn’t be able to perform their priestly work.

But the most plausible explanation is that they were simply afraid. -Afraid at the sight of your blood. -Afraid the robbers might still be hiding, waiting to pounce on whoever stopped to help. Yes, better to hurry on by, before they, too, became victims.

Then, a third set of footsteps. You look up again. Oh no. It looks like a Samaritan. That’s it. I’m doomed -you think. This Samaritan will probably just finish me off.

Yet, Jesus says, it is the despised Samaritan who stops - not to bring harm, but because he’s filled with compassion.

He comes over to you and kneels beside you; he takes out wine and oil from his pack and pours them over your wounds to clean them. He tears strips of cloth from his own shirt to make bandages for your injuries. He then gently lifts you up and sets you on his donkey, and takes you to an inn, pays for a room, and stays with you the whole night taking care of you.

The next day, he leaves money with the innkeeper - a lot of money, -enough for several nights’ stay. He tells the innkeeper to take care of you, and that when he

comes back in a few days, he'll pay whatever extra expense is owed.

This guy isn't just a good Samaritan. He's an amazingly good Samaritan. By risking danger, nursing wounds, delaying his own journey, and spending several days wages, he goes way above and beyond what we would expect from anybody, --let alone someone looked on as an enemy.

Jesus' story allows the lawyer to experience the role of a beaten, injured man who was graciously befriended and cared for by someone who had no reason to help him.

"Which of these three acted as a neighbor?" Jesus asks the lawyer. "The one who showed mercy," the lawyer answered. "Go and do likewise."

Did you notice that Jesus never really answered the lawyer's original question, "Who is my neighbor?" He turns the question around to be, "How should I act as a neighbor?" He changes the word neighbor from being the object of the question - to the subject.

Jesus is basically saying that the question, "Who is my neighbor?" is a meaningless question. For, there's no one who's not a neighbor.

Earlier, --in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus stated, "You've heard it said, 'you shall love your neighbors and hate your enemies.' But I say to you, love your enemies." 'Even our enemies are our neighbors,' Jesus is saying. 'You can no longer divide the world between us and them, -- there are only neighbors.'

So our question for the day is not, "Who is my neighbor?" *(In fact, take out your bulletin, and cross out the sermon title. It's the question we associate with the Good Samaritan story, but it's the wrong question. Instead, write in the real question from the parable, "How should I act as a neighbor?"*

How can we be like the Good Samaritan? How are we to go and do likewise?

As a church, we are currently in the process of discerning how we can best be neighbors. How is God calling us to go out into the world, and out into our community? How are we to be actively involved -- as our stewardship theme says, -- in "Making a Difference, and Changing Lives."

How do we go and do likewise? What are the personal resources, -- the wine, the oil, the bandages, the several days wages - we're to generously give? How are we to spend our time - being neighbors?

We're currently discerning whether that means going to Haiti - and/or serving the elderly, poor or disabled in our own community. Whether that means providing anti-malarial mosquito nets for children in Africa, or building relationships with children in Agua Prieta, Mexico, or all of the above.

We're still discerning what-all God is calling us to do as individuals and as a church. But we know we want to step up and do more; --to get out there and really make a difference.

And if you're still wondering whether or not to get involved, - or where to serve or how much to give, --I invite you to think of this parable -- and what you would want and need if you were the injured one on the receiving end. May we go and do likewise.