

Not That Hard
(Luke 10, Deut 30)

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This summer we are in the Gospel of Luke which contains some of the best known Gospel stories, stories that are found nowhere else in the Bible. The “Parables of the Lost” (the Lost or Prodigal Son, the lost sheep and the lost coin) are all found only in Luke, as is the story of little Zaccheaus who climbed a tree to see Jesus pass by and this morning’s Parable, the Good Samaritan.

Who is My Neighbor?

To understand the Good Samaritan story, it’s good to step back and consider the conversation that leads up to it. Jesus is talking to a man who is “seeking to justify himself.” In other words, a man who wants to be sure he has God’s approval for the sake of his own salvation; a motivation that Jesus will show to be very different from the faith of the Good Samaritan who is motivated by a compassion that is rooted in obedience to God’s will.

The man seeking to justify himself is a lawyer, which signals to us that his approach to his faith is legalistic; that he is all about rules. And he also appears to be motivated by the desire to minimize his obligations before God; to extend his care only as far as necessary in order to hold onto God’s approval. It would seem that caring for others is, in itself,

more of a tedium to his mind; more a tiresome and time consuming obligation, than a willing expression of his spirit. And the less caring he is compelled to do, the better.

So, when Jesus answers his question: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” with the words, “Love the Lord your God, and your neighbor as yourself,” the first thing he wants to know is how Jesus defines the word “neighbor.” Because, if the word “neighbor” only really applies to certain people, such as family members and relatives or to fellow Jerusalem-oriented Jews, then there is no reason why he has to concern himself with what happens to anyone who falls outside that definition. All he has to do is look out for the limited number of people in his circle, and he will be able to feel that he has done all that is necessary to have God’s approval **and** he will have carved out more time to pursue his own interests.

The Story

So, the Good Samaritan story is Jesus’s response to the lawyer’s question, “Who is my neighbor?” and to the concerns that lie behind that question. And the main point Jesus makes through his telling of the story is that no-one really falls outside the definition of “neighbor.” He doesn’t say so outright. But it is the unavoidable conclusion to which the story points.

By using a Priest and Levite, two people that the lawyer would have felt much akin to, as examples of disobedience to God's will, and then putting forward a despised foreigner, a Samaritan, as the ideal example of one who is obedient to God's will, Jesus turns the tables on the lawyer's expectations and deprives him of the assumption that the one who is most foreign falls outside the definition of neighbor; for by his deeds the Samaritan shows himself to be more a child of God than either the Priest or Levite.

And, whereas the lawyer's approach is to discriminate between one person and another in order to determine who he is required to care for, the Samaritan's willingness to extend God's love is indiscriminate. The Samaritan is not concerned with whether the injured man on the roadside is a fellow Samaritan or a Jerusalem-oriented Jew. Neither does it matter to Jesus, what the victim's origin is, and we know this because Jesus only describes the injured person as a "man." He omits the very information about the victim that the lawyer thinks is most critical to know, because to Jesus and to the Samaritan, that further information is irrelevant. What is important is that it is a "human being" who is helpless and dying alone on the road and that is the only thing the Samaritan needs to know in order to respond to God's command to "love your neighbor."

Ranking people differently and treating them accordingly is something Jesus is critical of in this story. And it is something we all do. Some guys with short neat haircuts only smile at people who also have short neat haircuts, they walk past a person with long or purple dyed hair as though the other isn't even there and it goes the other way as well. Neither the "hippy" nor the "square" is willing to be as kind or generous with the other, as they are with those to whom they feel more akin. Different markers create different stumbling blocks for different people. So that, in some way or other, we all fail to feel the same compassion for some that we feel for others.

When I lived in Hawaii, there was a blonde teenage surfer named Bethany Hamilton, who's arm was bitten off by a shark. A documentary was made about her courageous recovery and her story received nationwide coverage. It was a compelling human interest story. But, if you lived in Hawaii at the time, the irony would not have been lost on you that, of all the shark attack incidents, this would be one that got national attention.

Bethany's story was compelling and provided a legitimately heart-warming message that tugged on many heart-strings. But part of what made her story so compelling to so many, was that she looked like she

could have been anyone's daughter or niece. It would be naïve to think that the producers did not take this fact into account when they chose the story. They knew that the overwhelming response simply would not have been there, if the story had been about any one of the shark attack victims that year who were minorities.

But by making the Samaritan the person who behaves with the greatest purity of spirit and obedience to God, Jesus forces the lawyer, his disciples and us to consider that the most exemplary human being in the story is a member of the group least respected by the friends and acquaintances with whom Jesus is speaking. After all, is there any quality that better serves to indicate that a person is fully human than the way that person reaches out to and care for others?

It's Not That Hard

Jesus uses the story to highlight the way the Good Samaritan reaches out to care for the injured man on the road in a way that is both understated and beautiful, and beautiful because it is understated. There is a a simplicity and peaceful ease with which he conducts himself; an economy of action. Unlike the lawyer, he does not tie himself in knots with considerations about how he should define the

victim and whether he should or should not help him. He simply sees the situation clearly and acts.

The Good Samaritan embodies the reasoning in our passage from Deuteronomy, where it says:

Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.

And that is how it is with God's Commandment that we "love our neighbor as ourselves." It's not rocket science. It only becomes hard, when we make it hard.

God's love is like rain. The rain doesn't just fall on the fields of those who have been good and avoid the fields of those who have been bad. Rain is a gift that falls on everything that lies below, extending life to the good and the bad alike. And that is how Jesus's love and the love of the Good Samaritan is. Jesus didn't avoid sinners. He came for sinners; he came for us all. So why do we make things difficult by making such a

big deal out of picking and choosing who to shower kindness on and who to withhold it from?

I do believe that the ability to love our neighbors indiscriminately is “very near to us, in our mouths and hearts”, because it seems to me that we were first made to love in this way. I feel this is so in part because the church I served in Hawaii had a pre-school where I used to go and tell Bible stories. Whenever I approached, the little kids would come running to me with joyful and open hearts, taking my hand and leading me in as though I was the best thing that ever happened to them.

It is a very powerful and life-giving thing to be met in that way. And the truth is that it was somewhat discouraging to contrast them with the parents who came to pick them up at night. Weary and worn from a day at work, some would throw me a friendly smile or wave, others had poker faces and veiled expressions or gloomy looks; all were somehow responding to my being there by either withholding or extending friendship in some way shaped by whatever opinions or understandings my appearance brought to mind.

Somewhere between the natural openheartedness of childhood and adulthood we become a lot like the lawyer; we turn our natural

expressions of compassion into a means for expressing our judgement of others and we make what comes so naturally to the Good Samaritan into something complicated.

And this, I think, helps to explain the beauty of the Good Samaritan story. The Samaritan sees the helpless stranger in obvious need. He picks him up, cleans him off, takes him to an inn and pays for his night's stay. And all of this happens seamlessly.

The Samaritan doesn't agonize over whether the man in the road is worthy of his help. He doesn't engage in hand wringing or look at his watch and moan about how much time he will lose. There is no grandstanding, no drama, no desire to come off as exceptional or remarkable, no expectation of reward. All of the road blocks and bumps that we let get in the way of our own opportunities to show compassion are blessedly absent in this story. There is only a clear minded and peaceful response and resolution to obvious suffering; it all happens with a smooth and seamless economy of action.

The Good Samaritan gives us a wonderful example of what Jesus meant when he said, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light" and when he said "only those who receive the Kingdom of God like a child

shall enter it.” The Samaritan simply recognizes the need and responds with his God given natural compassion and goes on about his business.

Conclusion

The Spirit of Jesus as it is reflected to us through the Good Samaritan story is so important for us today as an antidote to the fragmentation and division that troubles our world. It reminds us that, both as individuals and as a congregation, we do not exist to give preferential treatment to some while being aloof and unconcerned about the suffering of others.

There is a spontaneous generosity of Spirit that God has given us that is not at all concerned with being legalistic about the way it extends itself. It is a Spirit in which we simply and naturally want to include everyone and everything. You see it in children and when you see it, you realize that, no matter how old you are, the child within is one of the most precious and important things about you or about any of us.

We are grown-ups and we can be very jaded and skeptical when others approach, without even realizing it. And it makes me think back to all those little preschool kids running to me with joyful and open arms and the impact that had on my heart. Imagine if we could be a church like

that! The hearts of visitors would be transformed instantly and pretty soon we would have to make our building big enough to accomodate the entire East Coast!