

## “And Who Is My Neighbor?”

(Talk given at the Beaverkill Church July 10, 2016 by Sally Cerny)

(Luke 10: 25-37) It's been a very rough week and, alas, there weren't many Good Samaritans in the news, but let's talk about the New Testament reading anyway. In today's world, we use the word Samaritan glibly for anyone who helps another without thought of personal reward. But in Jesus' Israel, Samaritan had a markedly different meaning, and Jesus' parable delivered a strong challenge to his listeners that we tend to miss today.

There have been many allegories and offshoots of the Good Samaritan parable. For example, was the Good Samaritan Jesus himself? I will skip the speculations and focus solely on Jesus' original parable. It is mercifully short—and one of Christ's most direct teachings, one critical to his core beliefs.

Let's start with the **Cast of Characters** in order of appearance:

**The lawyer:** Yep. It looks like lawyers' stories and jokes are here to stay. It was a lawyer way back then who was testing Jesus. It is his task to decipher what IS is . . . If I must love my neighbor as myself, 'Who IS my neighbor?'

**Jesus:** Here, teaching his salvation theology. With its emphasis on love and caring, Jesus' message contrasts sharply with Amos' Old Testament reading and its condemnation of Israel, as read by Ed today.

And then there is **the victim:** All we know about the victim is that he has been robbed, beaten, stripped of his clothes, and left half dead on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. He has no clothes to identify him. We don't know his cast, religious sect, or allegiances. It would be easy to look the other way. In a sense, the victim could be *Every man* to Jesus and *No man*

to the Pharisee and Levite. To Jesus, it makes no difference who he is when he needs help!

**A Priest or Pharisee and a Levite:** You must have noticed that, in general, priests, Pharisees, Sadducees, and Levites don't tend to fare well in Jesus' parables. Steeped in Old Testament scripture and torn between demands to remain pure and ritually holy and yet love their neighbor, they are devout religious Hebrews who surely just *know* that *they* are God's chosen people, the ones who will merit eternal life. They reject "unclean" peoples, and they count ritual and power (and their own power) as important. Here they do see the half-dead victim, but what do the priest and the Levite do? Each in his turn ignores him, and both "*pass by on the other side.*" *Not my neighbor and not my problem* is their conclusion, as they travel on down to Jericho. I think of this as the "building internal walls solution" . . . but I did promise myself not to be political.

So let's turn to the **Samaritan:** I remember asking, as a child, "What was a Samaritan?" and receiving the answer, "Just somebody from outside and unimportant, not a Jew." My teacher's point was that a Samaritan was an "*other,*" *not one of us!* In fact, the Samaritans are a real sect to this day. They are geographic neighbors who live in what was once the Northern Kingdom of Israel, sandwiched between Judea to the south and Galilee to the north. Unless you cross the Jordan twice, you have to go through Samaria to get from one to the other.

And finally there is **the innkeeper:** The man the Samaritan took the victim to, the man the Samaritan paid to nurse the victim back to health and life. The innkeeper is a bit part in the tale but an important part of the caring. I wonder, is he a Jew, and what is he thinking?

**The setting:** This is important! Jesus' tale, *unlike many* of his parables, takes place in a particular setting. "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho." Much of the meaning here originally was lost to me, because I,

sadly, have not been to the Holy Land . . . yet! Jericho is Northeast of Jerusalem. So why was the man traveling “down” to Jericho? Martin Luther King, Jr. described the geography well in his I Have Been to the Mountaintop sermon, which he delivered in Memphis the day before he was killed. He said, in imagining the thinking of the priest and the Levite,

*“It’s possible that those men were afraid. You see, the Jericho Road is a dangerous road. I remember when Mrs. King and I were first in Jerusalem. We rented a car and drove from Jerusalem down to Jericho. And as soon as we got on that road I said to my wife, ‘I can see why Jesus used this as the setting for his parable.’ It’s a winding, meandering road. It’s really conducive for ambushing.”*

In Jesus’ time, of course, there were no cars or pavement like those that King enjoyed, but there *were* bandits and highway robbers afoot. The road wasn’t improved into a passable roadway until the Romans did so to prepare for their assault on Jerusalem in 70 AD, well after Christ’s crucifixion. The Jericho Road was an infamous hangout of robbers who would attack their victims and then escape to the desert on either side. Jerusalem is 2500 ft. above sea level and has about 20 inches of rainfall per year. To put that in perspective, it is over 1000 feet *higher* than we mountain people are, and it receives about half the rainfall we do in Beaverkill. Jericho, just 18 miles away from Jerusalem, is a desert oasis with only 8 inches of rain per year, and it is 825 feet below . . . below sea level. The road down to Jericho is steep and winding, and the chance of rainfall drops as precipitously as the altitude. I am reminded of when Ed and I rode mules down the steep side of the South Rim of the Grand Canyon. We started at the edge with a dusting of snow and many layers of clothing. It was cold! As our sure-footed mules carried us lower and lower into the canyon, we shed our layers until, in the end, we were just in T-shirts and baking in a hot, desert climate. *We* didn’t have to worry about robbers, but, even so, I was heaping several extra measures of faith and trust onto my mule as we descended and then climbed back up. I couldn’t

have made the journey on my own, and my faith and trust in him freed me to relish every moment of the trip.

At this point, I'd like to return to the Good Samaritan, the man who actually saved the victim in Jesus' parable and showed what it means to be a good neighbor. Samaritans weren't just a "random out-group" in Jesus' time. They were those specifically *cast out* or outcasts, the people you totally ignored and rejected. No Samaritans in your synagogue or country club, for sure, and you really didn't even want them in your town. Jews are not supposed to associate or even talk with Samaritans, who are deemed unclean. Literally, however, as I said, a Samaritan just means someone from Samaria. Historically, from 922 to about 700 BC, the once unified monarchy of Saul and Solomon was split into the Northern Kingdom of Israel whose *capital was Samaria*, and the southern kingdom, Judea, which took Jerusalem as its capital. The Northern Kingdom included 10 of the original tribes of Israel or sons of Jacob, and the Southern Kingdom, Judea, encompassed the tribes of Judah and Simeon.

By Jesus' time both kingdoms had been conquered by larger outside powers, the Northern Kingdom by the Assyrians and the Southern Kingdom by the Babylonians, and in both kingdoms, the Jews were exiled. The difference was that the Northern Kingdom Israelis had been sent to all the corners of the earth, never to return, and became known as "the ten lost tribes of Israel." It's ironic that their conquering Assyrians came from present-day Syria, such a tortured people today, and it was these Assyrians who replaced the "lost tribes" in Samaria and adopted much of their religion. The southern kingdom exiles, by contrast, had been sent as a group to Babylonia, and they eventually were allowed to return to Judea as a group. Jesus was a remnant of this southern group and a "son of David." He was descended from the tribe of Judah in the old Southern Kingdom, and yet born in Nazareth, which was north of Samaria in Galilee. Instead of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem being the highest holy place, the Samaritans followed the ancient Torah but worshipped at Mt. Gerazim,

which towers high above the Left Bank. Jesus met the Samaritan woman at the well near Mt. Gerazim, and even today, there are still some surviving Samaritans who worship there.

In summary, a “Good” Samaritan as a deserving neighbor would have been a very bitter pill for pious Jews to swallow. Yet, as noted above, Jesus and his disciples did preach in neighboring Samaria, and their doing so is often looked on as the precursor of Paul’s teaching to the Gentiles later. In today’s parable, of course, Jesus is teaching that it is our deeds and not our birth or heritage that will determine our earning eternal life. Bob, could this belief be part of the reason Jesus was not so much a family man? If we focus only on and care only for those of our own family or group, do we diminish our talents and our ability to live in and strengthen the world around us?

So the central and difficult question that creates the parable is, as the lawyer said, “*Who is my neighbor?*” Part of the answer lies in whether we are looking outward or inward. When we glorify ourselves and label and demonize all others, then we polarize our world and limit our own ability to listen and to understand. Whether he was acting from fear of being attacked himself or fear of unclean, impure, outsiders, the priest or Pharisee did not respond to a neighbor in need and continued on down to Jericho. Likewise the pious Levite walked by and did nothing. But the simple Samaritan was free to see, to understand, and to reach out and help, and he did. Jesus challenged the lawyer, as he does us today, to “go and do likewise.” Here, the Samaritan, not the priest or Levite, is the holy man.

I’ll let you draw the parallels to today’s particularly perilous world and its politics. The Good Samaritan is a parable for all times, very much for ours—and it still carries both deep wisdom and a difficult challenge. I could double the length of this message by discussing some of the many modern

ramifications, but I promised not to be political. You're in luck; I won't, but I hope I can leave you with some food for thought.