

THE GOOD SAMARITAN

July 14, 2013

Good morning. Today we have on our plate one of the most famous of Jesus's parables, even one of the most famous passages in the entire Bible – the parable of the “Good Samaritan,” although it was not given this name until centuries later. The parable only occurs in Luke.

Let's first walk through the story again, so we can flesh it out a bit.

25- Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

It's struck me that the exchange between Jesus and the lawyer is like a chess match. The lawyer is playing white, so he goes first, with an aggressive move, but one that's no surprise; pretty conventional.

We're told that the lawyer is going to “test” Jesus. (A more common word for “lawyer” in the New Testament is “scribe.”) We aren't told why the lawyer was “testing” him. The guy was a lawyer, or scribe, after all, used to the cut and thrust of question and answer in debating issues from the Torah – maybe he just wanted to arm wrestle, having heard that Jesus was a formidable debater. On the other hand, he might have been out for blood; he may have intended to trip Jesus up and make him say something outrageous. We read in the Gospels that at this point in Jesus's ministry the scribes and Pharisees were beginning to become hostile toward him and to cross-examine him so they could catch him in something he might say. This may be what the lawyer is up to. In any event, I would bet that when the lawyer spoke up the crowd quickly fell silent. Now it's Jesus's move, playing the “black pieces.”

26-JESUS [He] said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?”

In other words, “back at you” – you know the law, you tell me.” A conventional defensive move, no surprise to either player.

Then we read:

27-THE LAWYER [He] answered, “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 your neighbor as yourself.”

The lawyer’s right, of course; both of these requirements were settled law, found in the Old Testament; the first commandment, which observant Jews would recite twice a day, is in Deuteronomy, the second, straight from God’s mouth, in Leviticus 19. So the lawyer’s move is again conventional, nothing surprising

28-And JESUS [he] said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

As if to say, “Good boy, you got that right. Go do it and you’re golden.” So far the “players” have gone by the book, with conventional moves, no surprises. And so far the lawyer has not laid a glove on Jesus (to mix metaphors).

But we’re not done. Now the lawyer plays a gambit, as it were:

29-But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

As if to say “not so fast, Jesus. I can’t “go do this” until I know who my neighbor is.” And this question can be a trap for the unwary; from other things we read in Leviticus, the answer isn’t so clear. Is my neighbor just the guy next door or down the street, or something else? But Jesus accepts the gambit, so to speak, and if we follow the chess analogy through, he goes on the attack; he sets up his attack by telling the parable:

30- Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead.³¹ Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.³² So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

Now, when Jesus says the man was “going down” from Jerusalem to Jericho he means it literally. That road is 17 miles long, winding through rocky terrain; it descends from Jerusalem, which is on a mountain, more than 3000 feet to Jericho, which is below sea level in a valley near the Dead Sea. There are plenty of chances for ambush and escape. In Jesus’s day, the Jericho Road was a notorious trap for solitary travelers; it was known as “the Bloody Pass.” So perhaps it’s not surprising that the Priest and the Levite pass by. We’re not told why, but they may just not want to get involved, perhaps for fear of being robbed themselves. Furthermore, the priest and the Levite are both Jewish clergy; the man may be dead, and touching a dead body renders a Jew unclean, so they would be unable to perform their clerical duties until the seven-day cleansing ceremony was complete. In any event, we mustn’t think of these two as the bad guys; in fact, in Jewish culture they were good guys. Presumably Jewish law, including the second commandment as they interpreted it, didn’t require them to do anything; they didn’t recognize the man as a neighbor of theirs. Bottom line, “Hey, stuff happens -- after all, it’s the Jericho Road.”

Now enters the Samaritan:

33-But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity.³⁴ He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him.³⁵ The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’

There are several things to notice about this passage. First, making the hero of the story a Samaritan was a real stick in the eye to a Jewish audience. For reasons we can't go into at length here, the Jews generally despised Samaritans; they considered them heretics, and half-breeds because they intermarried with pagans – they were worse than pagans and Jews avoided contact with them whenever possible. And Samaritans generally returned the favor. Making the hero of the piece a Samaritan would be like telling a tale, for an audience of local worthies in a small southern town at the turn of last century, a tale of a white traveler in a seedy party of town being helped by a prosperous black business man after the pastor and deacon of the local white church passed him by; or like telling a Muslim audience of one of their own being rescued by a Jew.

Second, notice that the Samaritan doesn't hesitate or deliberate; he sees the man and is moved with pity and acts. It's probably impossible to tell, but the man is probably a Jew who might well not repay the favor were their circumstances reversed; but this is of no consequence to the Samaritan. Third, he goes all out; he doesn't just throw a cloak over the Man, give him some water, and look around as he travels on for someone to alert; he treats his wounds, somehow gets him on his animal, takes him to an inn, pays the innkeeper what was then about 2 days' laborer's wages, and promises to pay more for the man's care later.

After talking about the Samaritan Jesus makes his move; he asks,

36-Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?"³⁷ [The lawyer says,] {He said,} "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

Checkmate!

Notice that the lawyer can't even bring himself to say "the Samaritan." It's "well, uh, the, uh, one who showed him mercy." Notice also that Jesus doesn't go on with an explanation of how all this impacts the commandment to love one's neighbor as one's self. He doesn't draw out a lesson for the crowd to take with them. He just says "Go and do likewise." Another stick in the eye: As if to say, here's your answer: Go do what the Samaritan did, not what the Priest and Levite did. Do you have a problem with that?

End of game.

What does this parable tell us? The lessons aren't hard to draw:

First, it's about involvement. The Samaritan, perhaps even more than the Priest and the Levite, had plenty of reason not to get involved. But he plunged right in. When we encounter those in need of help, there's always a reason not get involved. And as often as not, it's a credible reason. I remember when I first thought about this parable, I transposed it to today's New York City and thought, well, things are a bit different today; there are more diseases around and you don't know where the guy's been; there are more enterprising lawyers around and you don't know what you could get sued for; there are more scams around and you don't know whether the guy has some friends waiting to jump you. If you give to the beggar on the subway (and begging on the subway is illegal anyway) you'll just encourage other beggars... Still, at the end of the day, the parable invites us to transpose the old Zionist saying – If not me, who? If not now, when? Kitty Genovese would have been grateful if someone had asked themselves these questions. So it's about involvement.

Second, it's about keeping your heart open to the suffering and the needy, about staying open to the needs of others, feeling them. Jesus tells us that the Samaritan "came near him, and when he saw him he was moved with pity." Jesus also once said "the poor are always with us," and it can sometimes be hard to get through a day unless one focuses only on one's own problems. But if my neighbor is not just the guy next door or the guy down the road but any person, even a stranger, in need, and I at least try to love him or her as I love myself, then his or her suffering will be as real to me as my own. In his "I've been to the Mountaintop" speech, the day before he died, Martin Luther King talked about the road to Jericho and the Good Samaritan; he said that the first question both the Priest and the Levite asked was "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?" while the Samaritan asked, "If I don't stop to help this man, what will happen to him?" The Samaritan's heart was open to the suffering and needs of others.

Third, it's about loving your enemies. This was a famous theme of Jesus's, and he strikes it in this parable. As we said, the Samaritan must have thought that the man in need was probably a Jew, one who thought of him as an enemy, but this was irrelevant to him. Of all the lessons of the parable, this is perhaps the hardest to deal with, but there it is.

Of course, there's one more thing that the scripture passage itself tells us, and that's the last line: "Go and do likewise." Obviously, one can read it as meant for everyone, not just the lawyer. Jesus is telling us what we should do as we travel the road to Jericho. And travel it we will. Travel it we do. We can try to stay off of the road to Jericho, but sooner or later we find ourselves there. Sometimes on the road to Jericho we find ourselves in the shoes of the man in need, and if we're lucky there's a Samaritan there to help us. All too often, at least in my case, I'm in the shoes of the priest and the Levite, and I pass by on the other side. I know people who

have acted the part of the Samaritan, some of them in this room. Each of us has to ask whether the parable speaks to him or her and what it says. Perhaps even ask whether to seek out the Jericho Road and try a hand at being the Samaritan. As a literal matter, the parable's about the interpretation of Jewish law and a certain commandment. But just as you don't have to be Jewish to love Levy's rye bread, you can respond to the parable's moral vision in its own right regardless of whether you're a Jew, a Christian, an agnostic, or whatever.

I'm thinking this morning of another traveler on the Jericho Road – our little church. For years we've been part of a large group, traveling more or less together, even if lately we've been straying more and more into the byways by ourselves. But now we're alone, setting off by ourselves, and although that road out there in front is peaceful and quiet, you and I know that if we travel it far enough we'll find that it's the road to Jericho too. Hopefully, we won't be set upon by robbers. But hopefully also, we won't just pass by those in need. It's been suggested that we take a portion of the offerings we receive every Sunday, perhaps a tithe, and find a way to get it into the hands of those in need. My first reaction when I heard this suggestion was that we should wait until we have our bills paid and our affairs in order. I thought of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in NYC -- it never has finished off its soaring towers because it's been devoting its resources to helping others. But in preparing today's talk I've had a chance to reflect: What if the Samaritan had said, "Of course I'll help this poor man -- just as soon as I drop off my package in Jericho I'm going to rush back and do all I possibly can...." The need is now. It will always be now. So the Board will be considering whether we can, and should, go forward with this idea, of giving a portion of our offering to the needy and the suffering; if we do, we hope that all will support it so that we can, in Jesus's words, "Go and do likewise" and walk in the shoes of the Samaritan. Thanks for listening.