

“The Story of the *Bad Samaritan*”

Luke 10:25-37

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We are all familiar with this story, right? The “good Samaritan” saves the poor man by the side of the road. He is so *compassionate*, so *caring*, and we should all try to be like him. Indeed, we name hospitals, nursing homes, homeless shelters, and churches after him. We chide ourselves for not “loving our neighbor” like that *wonderful* Samaritan did, when he saved the poor man at the side of the road. That Samaritan did things the way they *should* be done!

...But... when it comes to our scriptures, and especially the parables of Jesus, things are rarely as they seem. What seems like a simple story of a cruel priest, an insensitive Levite, and a kind, gentle Samaritan, has more twists and turns than that dangerous road to Jericho! What sounds like such a no-brainer story to *our* ears would have been a *shocking*, even *scandalous* tale to those who first heard Jesus tell it!

You see, this Samaritan, whom we have raised upon a pedestal with our charitable organizations of the same name, and our expressions: “what a ‘good Samaritan’ he or she was!” -- this Samaritan would have appeared in a very different light to the Israelites who originally heard Jesus tell the tale.

The Samaritans and the Jewish people were *avowed enemies* at this point in history. They viewed one another with suspicion and distaste. Samaritans were considered *ritually unclean* and *social outcasts*. In fact, if the beaten man by the side of the road had been alive enough to say so, he may well have told his Samaritan savior to *bug off* and leave him alone.

The hearers of the story would have had a similar response. They would have identified most closely with the *victim* -- seen him as a common Israelite, one of their own. When Jesus told them about the priest passing by the beaten man, they would have scoffed and thought something like, “Oh, those priests with their laws about ritual purity and their ‘holier-than-thou’ attitudes! So typical that they would pass a poor man by!”

A similar response would have been elicited by the passing Levite. Levites were *also* members of the religious elite, and the listeners to Jesus’ story likely would have rolled their eyes and thought, “Go figure! Of course *he* wouldn’t help!”

They would have, rightly, expected the third man to be the savior, the one who would save the poor victim from his plight. And, of course, the “savior” would be a good ol’ Israelite like themselves, a “man of the earth,” a man to be trusted.

Instead... enter the *Samaritan!* Imagine jaws dropping among every one of Jesus’ listeners. *A Samaritan!!* Oh, no! What’s *he* going to do?!?! Most likely finish off our poor man by the side of the road! He wouldn’t rescue an Israelite if his own life depended on it!

...Of course, we know that is not what happened. Instead, the Samaritan tended the man's wounds, lifted him from the side of the road, and took him to a nearby inn, where he entreated the innkeeper to care for him and provided him ample sums to do so.

Total shock. Nooo!!! How in the heck did a *Samaritan* become the *hero* of the story?!?! What on earth?!?!

...We who hear the story today think of the Samaritan as the good guy, the *obvious hero*, the man of God. We think of the Samaritan as the one who saw the victim as his neighbor, who reached out to him when no one else would. Indeed, the lawyer to whom Jesus speaks recognizes the mercy of the Samaritan -- shocked though he may have been to recognize it. And Jesus affirms that the lawyer has seen rightly and should do likewise.

But the lawyer's question: "Who is my neighbor?" would likely have been seen in a different light than we see it today. We equate the *Samaritan* with charity, and the "*neighbor*" as a beaten man by the side of the road, or a homeless woman, or a person who is ill, or someone else in need of our loving care. For Jesus' listeners, the tables would have been twisted and turned.

"What?! Can a *Samaritan* really be my *neighbor*?! If I were the (Israelite) man by the side of the road, would I even *let* that Samaritan touch me? *Would I accept his help?*"

This seems like a more than pertinent question today. *Who is my neighbor?! The question does not only ask "Who would I be willing to help by the side of the road?" but also, "Who are the Samaritans in my world? Who are the social outcasts, the 'unclean'?"* We may not understand the tensions between ancient Samaritans and Israelites. But we surely have our own tensions, based on religious, racial, political, "moral," and national lines. We are every bit as skilled at dividing ourselves as were the people of the ancient world, and while we say cheerfully that we wish to emulate this "good Samaritan," how good are we, *really*, at being the neighbor?

A few days after September 11th, my seminary ethics professor had to fly back to St. Louis. When he returned from his trip, he told our class, honestly, that when he saw "Arab-looking" people in line with him at the security gate, he felt *nervous*. He knew he was being *irrational*, he knew he was being *racist*, and he admitted this to our class openly. But his gut reaction was to fear anyone who "looked Middle Eastern." For him, the *Arab* was the *Samaritan*.

My professor knew what racism felt like. He had related to our class what it was like for him to be an African American seminary professor at a time when there were few African Americans in that profession. He knew what it was like to be judged by the color of his skin, to be the "Samaritan." But in those days following September 11th, the "person of Middle Eastern descent" became for him the enemy -- though he knew well that he judged wrongly. Most Arab Americans will tell you that things have not improved much for them since then.

This brings to mind the question: "*Who is our neighbor?*" Would we be willing to help a man in a turban if we saw him in danger? Would we be willing to *accept* his help? We know the *right* answers to these questions, and we would like to think that we would respond as Jesus' taught: "To love our neighbor as ourselves." But is this how we would *actually* respond? Can we see the Arab as neighbor?

Several years ago I served as pastoral intern at an interfaith residence for people living with HIV/AIDS. After my initial orientation session, I went home thinking, “*What am I doing?* I will be around one of the most deadly diseases in the world. I *know* that it is extremely unlikely for a pastoral intern to contract AIDS from casual contact with people who have the disease. I *know* it cannot be contracted through hand shakes or breath or any of the other minor physical contacts I might have with the residents here. ...But what if I get pricked with a needle or something? ...*What if?!?!?*”

I ultimately realized that I had been called by God to this work, and that the *work of God requires risks*, minor though they may actually be. And I loved my work there. But for that one brief moment of doubt, the person with HIV/ AIDS became the Samaritan to me.

When you ask, “*Who is my neighbor?*”, ask first, “*Who is my Samaritan?*” Who is the one I am least likely to love, who I cannot bring myself to embrace? And you know that *this* is the one who Jesus is calling you to love. *This* is your neighbor.

In prayer, let us welcome the neighbor. Now let us pray.