

The Next One
Luke 10:25-37
Preached by Rev. Dr. Harry Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
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A temple lawyer, seeking to justify himself, asked Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” expecting Jesus to give him a neat little formula covering the minimum requirements. Instead, Jesus turned the tables and rearranged the question. It’s no longer “Who is my neighbor?” but “Am I a good neighbor?”

I’ll be honest, this isn’t my favorite parable. I prefer the parables about the Prodigal Son and the lost sheep being found or the tiny mustard seed growing into a large tree. These are parables easy to love because they speak of bringing the Kingdom to our front door and welcoming us into the family of God. We may not deserve it, but God loves us anyway.

But this Samaritan parable sends a different message. Remember, the lawyer’s conversation with Jesus began with the question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Maybe he wanted Jesus to tell one of his warm fuzzy parables about the good shepherd leaving behind the ninety and nine to find one, lost sheep who nibbled his way away from the flock. Instead, Jesus confronted the lawyer with a parable challenging us to rethink our obligations to the next person who crosses our path, whoever that next one may be.

Interesting fact, the actual Greek word “neighbor” which literally means “someone just like me” isn’t used here. Instead, when the lawyer asks, “Who is my neighbor?” the literal translation reads, “Who is my next one?” So when you hear the commandment “You shall love God with all your heart, mind and strength and you shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you’re being told your idea of neighborhood and God’s idea of neighborhood aren’t necessarily the same thing. But if you take Jesus seriously, you can’t pick and choose who you’ll welcome with open arms.

Now when Jesus finally revealed the true hero of the parable was a Samaritan, that lawyer’s jaw must have dropped to the floor. First century Jews hated Samaritans for being half breeds, heretics and hillbillies. Probably as Jesus introduced the Samaritan in the parable, the lawyer was thinking, “Ah, the villain of the story has arrived.” Instead, the Samaritan, treating his next one with bravery and compassion became the ideal role model.

Here’s a modern day story paralleling this parable. A member of a small Southern Baptist Church needed to go every day to therapy. Right away there were volunteers from the congregation to drive their friend to the therapist but, there were still several days when help was needed. So this small church got the

word out to the surrounding churches for volunteers. Guess where the volunteers came from? The only church who responded was the local Metropolitan Community Church which, if you don't already know, is a denomination that ministers primarily to gay and lesbians. Did this small fundamentalist church accept the offer? Yes, they did, hesitantly at first, but something tells me the Parable of the Good Samaritan had something to do with their affirmative, though cautious answer. Those Southern Baptists were most likely expecting other Baptists or Methodists or even Presbyterians to answer their calls for help. Instead, they got the surprise of their lives when the pastor of the Metropolitan Community Church called to ask, "What can we do to help?"

Likewise, the surprise ending of this parable is: the only one who showed compassion was not the Priest, or the Levite, but someone beyond the pale turned out to be the good neighbor. So maybe this parable isn't just about helping someone you think is unacceptable, it's also about receiving help from someone unacceptable, making this parable a double edged sword. Jesus catches us off guard and corners us into rethinking our concept of neighborhood and our willingness to "go and do likewise."

Maybe you can now understand why I admitted earlier I don't favor this parable, it keeps me up at night when I connect the lawyer's opening question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" with answers hidden like land mines.

Apparently, the full abundant life through Christ is predicated on our relationship, not only with God, but especially our neighbor or "the next one" who just happens to stumble into your presence. But do these "next ones" actually stumble into our presence? Is it random chance you are helped by a Good Samaritan or is God somehow orchestrating these encounters for your own good?

Some years back a group of researchers ran a study how people respond to people in distress. As unsuspecting people passed a dark alley a woman, on cue, would cry out. Two other people, also participants in the experiment, would then walk past the alley, ignoring the woman's cries. The unsuspecting passerby noticing the other two people ignoring the cry for help decided it shouldn't be taken seriously, so he ignored them too.

What was the conclusion of the researchers? Simply this, your response to someone in distress is often determined by how other people respond. In other words, you take your cue from the action or inaction of someone else. But if you see someone else get involved then you, too are prone to do likewise. The only problem is someone has to act first so the most important person in any crisis situation is the first person to get involved.

Just a few moments ago I asked the question, "Is it by random chance we either become, or are helped by, a good Samaritan or is God somehow setting

up these encounters?" Naturally I think the latter. I believe God is somehow involved in everything that happens. I'm not saying God causes things to happen, especially situations putting people at risk, but God works out his purposes making all things work for good.

The big question facing us? Will we choose to become part of God's purpose and be that compassionate presence to anyone who is either literally or even figuratively left beaten and bloodied by the roadside?

Knowing this congregation as well as I do, I know you want to be Good Samaritans and help your neighbor. If there was any hesitation on your part, it would be the concern that the next one may not be wanting the right kind of help or may even be setting you up to be a victim.

Two cases in point. Once a man came to the church asking for a few dollars for food. Wanting to do the right thing, I gave him some money and felt good about it until a half an hour later I saw him standing outside a liquor store swigging a bottle of cheap liquor. On another occasion late one night there was a banging on our front door. Since it was after 11 o'clock I called down from the second story window. The man said he needed gas money and gave a convoluted story of woe. Sensing something wasn't right, I asked the man to leave. As he was leaving another man stepped out of the shadows to go with him.

My point is, I don't think Christ is asking us to be suckers or crime victims. Once Jesus warned his disciples to be "as wise as serpents, but as gentle as doves." We must always keep an eye out for the wolves in sheep's clothing who roam about ready to pounce, so be wise and careful.

One more thing. Obviously when you're a good Samaritan the one you help benefits in more ways than one, but you do too. Of course you "feel good" for a job well done, but on a deeper level, deeper than your feelings, something happens to your soul, you're being mystically transformed into the image of Christ.

When Jesus said, "Come, follow me" he wasn't just inviting men and women to hear what he had to say, but to especially "be" with him.

It's common knowledge we tend to become like the people we hang around with. The more you stay with someone the more you think and act like that person. The people you associate with will either bring you up or down to their level. Certainly the longer you stay with Jesus the more you become like him. So when you give yourself away to the next one, as Jesus gave himself away to you, somehow in a wonderful way the Holy Spirit transforms you into becoming more human and Christ-like.

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So, the parable of Good Samaritan is a call to accept and welcome anyone God sends our way and always remember the one you help or let help you, may be Christ himself.

I really like those quotations on the bulletin cover this morning especially the one that reads, "You cannot live a perfect day without doing something for someone who will never be able to repay you." Have a perfect day.

Let us pray!