

The parable of the Samaritan. You will hear the story read in the *Cotton Patch* version of Luke, which was written by Clarence Jordan in the 1940's racially divided Georgia. The problem with reading our biblical texts... especially Jesus' words, is we are so far removed from them, we have lost the shock value. How many of us understand what a *scribe*, a *Levite*, or a *Samaritan* actually were in Jesus' day? But when we put the parable into cultural terms we can understand and relate to, suddenly we begin to realize how radical Jesus was, and how far he is asking us to stretch.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan, Cotton Patch Version (Luke 10:25-37)

One day a teacher of an adult Bible class got up and tested him with this question: "Doctor, what does one do to be saved?"

Jesus replied, "What does the Bible say? How do you interpret it?"

The teacher answered, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your physical strength and with all your mind; and love your neighbor as yourself."

"That is correct," answered Jesus. "Make a habit of this and you'll be saved." But the Sunday school teacher, trying to save face, asked, "But ... er ... but ... just who *is* my neighbor?"

Then Jesus laid into him and said, "A man was going from Atlanta to Albany and some gangsters held him up. When they had robbed him of his wallet and brand-new suit, they beat him up and drove off in his car, leaving him unconscious on the shoulder of the highway.

"Now it just so happened that a white preacher was going down that same highway. 'When he saw the fellow, he stepped on the gas and went scooting by.

"Shortly afterwards a white Gospel song leader came down the road, and when he saw what had happened, he too stepped on the gas.

"Then a black man traveling that way came upon the fellow, and what he saw moved him to tears. He stopped and bound up his wounds as best he could, drew some water from his water-jug to wipe away the blood and then laid him on the back seat. He drove on into Albany and took him to the hospital and said to the nurse, 'You all take good care of this white man I found on the highway. Here's the only two dollars I got, but you all keep account of what he owes, and if he can't pay it, I'll settle up with you when I make a pay-day.'

"Now if you had been the man held up by the gangsters, which of these three—the white preacher, the white song leader, or the black man – would you consider to have been your neighbor?"

The teacher of the adult Bible class said, "Why, of course, the nig – I mean, er ... well, er ... the one who treated me kindly."

Jesus said, "Well, then, *you* get going and start living like that!"

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Luke 10: 29-37

The Life You Save May be your Own!

On the morning of June 15, a gunman opened fire on Republican lawmakers at a baseball practice in Alexandria, VA. The team was preparing for the annual congressional baseball game the next day. Among the five shot, was Louisiana Rep. Steve Scalise, the third-ranking Republican in the House who was shot in the hip.

Three capital police special agents were specifically present because of Scalise's role in House leadership. Two went onto the field (**Crystal Griner** and **David Bailey**), with only handguns against the sniper and were shot. Their actions probably prevented an even greater tragedy.

Just doing their job. But the ironic twist is that Officer Crystal Gringer is a married lesbian, and Representative Scalise has fought against that very marriage equality.

Two people on different sides of an emotionally charged fence, put in a life and death situation with each other. One saved the other's life.

I lift up this story because it illustrates how cacophonous Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan really is. Like so many of Jesus' parables, because we are removed by 2000 years of history and culture ... we have lost the stark shock value of Jesus' story and instead sanitized it.

Good Samaritan. It has a nice ring, doesn't it? Someone who helps someone else in need. I think of those decals on RVs of the folks who belong to the *Good Sam club*. Now the largest RV organization, it was founded in 1966. Club members originally promised to help fellow travelers on America's highways.



It is part of our lingo to refer to folks who go out of their way to help... as *Good Samaritans*; and it comes from *this* story. On the surface the parable seems like a story of a kind traveler helping someone in dire need... especially after two others had passed the victim by. But Jesus' parable goes way beyond the concept of human decency... all the way to the extreme of one enemy helping another.

So let's unpack this parable, shall we?

First the set-up. Luke writes that a religious lawyer *stood up to TEST Jesus*. Now this word TEST is the same word that is used of Satan testing Jesus in the wilderness. So our ears should be perked up.

The question he asks Jesus is:
What must I do to inherit eternal life?

But Jesus turns the tables and asks two fascinating questions:

What is written in the law (and)
What do you read there?

Kind of like the Wesleyan quadrilateral...
 not just what is there in black and white... but
 what and *how* does your head and your heart
 and your religious experience inform your understanding?

It's such a great and deep question:
What do you read there?



But our lawyer is going strictly by the book:

*“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.”*

“Right answer,” Jesus says... “go do it! “

Ahhh... but there is some wiggle room here for the lawyer ...

*“Just exactly **who** is my neighbor?”*

It reminds me of the maybe apocryphal story of **WC Fields** in the hospital dying. W.C. had a reputation for hating children, loving booze, and being pretty cynical about life in general, and didn't have much use for religion.

A friend came by to visit and found him reading a Bible.

“What are you doing WC?” the friend asked, to which WC replied:
“Looking for a loophole. Looking for a loophole!”

Our lawyer is looking for the loophole that will justify life as he had lived it and planned to keep on living it.

And so Jesus tells this parable that upends what everyone in that community understood to be how the world works:

A Jewish man is going from Jerusalem to Jericho... a very hilly and dangerous area because of robbers. And indeed he is robbed, beaten and left for dead.

The next two passersby (also on the road *from d* Jerusalem to Jericho), you would expect to stop and help: a **Priest and a Levite**. ... or as Clarence Jordan re-culturates it:

a **Preacher**
and a **Gospel Song Leader....**

... the very Folks you would think would stop to help... but no, on they go, pretending not to notice... making excuses.



The next person to come by is a **Samaritan**. Samaritans and Jews were enemies. Each thought the other worshiped wrong and had nothing to do with the other. It would be safe to say they were enemies, and the feelings went both ways.

Jordan casts the Samaritan as a black man in 1940's segregated, KKK, Georgia .. who stops and helps the white man.

For a Jew to be held and carried by a Samaritan would be as distasteful as a white man back in the worst of Jim Crow South to be touched and bandaged by a black man. Both the Jewish and the white victims would probably have preferred to *die in a ditch* than be cared for by the Samaritan/black man.

But I think the crux of the story is the almost throw-away line Jesus uses:

"... but he(the Samaritan) was moved with compassion/pity".
(Jordan says: *moved to tears.*)

Again... the word used for **compassion** here is only used three times in Luke: here with the Samaritan, and the other two times only in reference to Jesus. In other words, the outsider, the stranger, the enemy is acting like Jesus to the one he hates and who hates him.

We all know the rest of the story: how the Samaritan takes him to get help and pays for all expenses himself.

And Jesus ends the story by asking the lawyer:

"WHO was the NEIGHBOR to the victimized man?"

And the lawyer has to admit..though he cannot even say the name **Samaritan**... he says *"The one who showed mercy."*

When Martin Luther King Jr. preached on this parable, he said that the priest and the Levite didn't stop to help because they were afraid for themselves; as if to say,

"If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?"

But in juxtaposition, the Samaritan came by and stopped and reversed the question:

*"If I **do not stop** to help this man, what will happen to him?"*

Amy-Jill Levine, is a Jewish theologian, biblical scholar, and professor of New Testament Studies at Vanderbilt University Divinity School. She has written on Jesus' parables, and about this one she puts it into *our* 21st century setting:

"What once was ancient Samaria is now the West Bank — the two share the same ground. I am an Israeli Jew on my way from Jerusalem to Jericho, and I am attacked by thieves, beaten, stripped, robbed, and left half dead in a ditch.

"Two people who should have stopped to help pass me by: the first, a Jewish medic from the Israel Defense Forces; the second, a member of the Israel/Palestine Mission Network of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A.

"But the person who takes compassion on me and shows me mercy is a Palestinian Muslim whose sympathies lie with Hamas, a political party whose charter not only anticipates Israel's destruction, but also depicts Jews as subhuman demons responsible for all the world's problems."

Drawing the circle wider means channeling Jesus' compassion and mercy.... especially to those I have a hard time relating to, are different, I'm fearful of, or judgmental about.



In our *progressive* church and city, who would we react to as Other?

- The religious/political conservative/fundamentalists?
- The habitual street dweller who trashes the sidewalk?
- The racist? The Sexist? The Homophobic?
- Those who would take away healthcare and Medicaid and Medicare?

I love the TV documentary series by Morgan Spurlock, **30 Days**. In the series he asks an ordinary American to step out of his or her comfort zone **and live with** and in someone else's reality (which is totally opposite), for 30 days.

Some of the pairings are:

- an avid hunter with a PETA member
- an opponent to gay adoption with two gay domestic partners and their 4 foster children.
- A staunch opponent of gun ownership with a gun shop owner and collector
- An atheist with a Christian
- A minuteman opponent to undocumented workers
Goes to live with an Hispanic family in LA
where the father is undocumented.

Who would you be paired with?

Who are you farthest from in understanding?

What would it take for you to channel the compassion of Jesus?

So let's go back to back to that initial question from the lawyer:

Who IS my neighbor?

Is there a loophole?

Can we draw the circle wider by one person this week?

Can we reframe our concern from:

What will happen to ME if I help to...

What will happen to THEM if I **don't** help?

The life we save may be our own.

Preached by the Rev. Pamela Nelson-Munson at Eugene's First United Methodist Church.