

July 11, 2010

### *Samaritan*

At our Hand in Hand church camp this week, which includes all kinds of young people but especially those with mental disabilities, an important visitor asked to address the campers, "I would like to tell them who I am and what I am doing here," he said. I replied, "Actually, the campers don't care who you are." (One of them, after half a week together and 30 years of my directing this camp had just referred to me as the man with the cap.) I told this visitor to join in the campers, sit and talk with them, help them with the craft activity. They care not about who you say you are, but how you treat them, what you do for them (aren't we all that way?), how you are a neighbor to them.

On Jesus' way to Jerusalem, an expert in Biblical law asked him how to inherit eternal life. "What must I do?" "You know the scriptures," replied Jesus, "what does it say there?" Now the expert in Bible law is on the spot, "Love God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind, and your neighbor as yourself." "Correct! Do this, and you will live." You might say, do this and you will be living eternal life already now! The law expert however pressed the question, "Who is my neighbor?" I know it is not simply the person who lives in the house next to me, but how far does it go -- to my kin, or does it extend to any my people? Where are the limits? Just who is my neighbor? Jesus then tells a parable which changes the **neighbor** question from object to subject. It is not who out there is my neighbor, but rather *whose neighbor am I?* How can I be a true neighbor? What does it mean for me to be a neighbor?

A man was going down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers. This was a dangerous road, falling in elevation 3,300 feet in 17 miles with narrow passes and lots of rocky places to hide. The robbers stripped and beat the man leaving him half dead. The victim was likely heard to be a Jew, but an unsympathetic character, described as a traveler, suggesting the merchants or traders who were notoriously dishonest. Such traveling traders could hardly stay ritually clean with their diets, and so this victim would be a source of contamination to any who stopped to help him. We tend to read this parable with ourselves as the one who finally stops to help (or should), from the standpoint of the fortunate reaching down to help the unfortunate. Today, let's read it with you as the victim, by the side of the road.

A priest comes along but passes by on the other side of the road. As does a Levite (temple assistant). Maybe they have good reasons, maybe not. But we expect the hero to come along next in the story, and so he does. He should be a Jewish hero. But Jesus stuns the listeners: it is a **Samaritan**. What a shocking, scandalous development. A *Samaritan* stops to help a half-dead *Jewish* man by the side of the road. A heretic, outcast, back-biting half-breed Samaritan! Today in our culture the Samaritan has been transformed into a secularized saint ("Great guy who helps people"). But nowhere in the parable does it say he was *good*, a "good" Samaritan. He was surely a "despised" Samaritan, as were they all: a mixed race after the northern kingdom of Israel fell to Assyria in 722, back-stabbers who opposed the rebuilding of the temple and city

after the Exile, heretics who worshiped on Mt. Gerizim rather than Mt. Zion in Jerusalem. Samaritans and Jews considered each other outcasts. A Samaritan town had just turned Jesus away from entering their town.

Whether it be the Bible law expert, the half-dead victim, or Jesus' audience, great ethnic animosity, religious disgust, and personal resentment would be felt toward this Samaritan. One might just as well call it the Parable of the Good Klansman, or the Good Communist, or Good Terrorist.

The Samaritan however was moved with compassion. To that half-dead man by the side of the road, the Samaritan showed **mercy**. It could have been a trick, a trap, a scheme to rob him as well. The Samaritan would face ridicule for this from both Jews and fellow Samaritans. Nevertheless, he touches the victim (thereby contaminating himself), bandages him, lifting him in order to get him to an inn where he not only gives the innkeeper two days wages for the victim's care, but leaves his credit card number for any additional expense. Mercy.

Jesus turned to the expert in Bible law, "Which of the three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" "The one," he replied -- he couldn't even make himself say the name, *Samaritan* -- the one who showed him mercy."

This parable does not tell us to "be a good person", but to **be a neighbor**. How? By joining the scandal, imitating the Samaritan's reckless compassion, and following what is in the eyes of others his stupid mercy. Spend your life on others. Be willing to lay down your life as Jesus will soon do for us all. *Love your neighbor as yourself*. "That's right!" replied Jesus. Do that and you will already be living life with God, tasting eternal life.

Not long ago a twelve-year-old Palestinian boy, Ahmad, was shot and killed by Israeli soldiers during street fighting near his house in Jenin, the West Bank. The boy had been holding a toy gun. He was taken to an Israeli hospital, where he died after two days. His parents made the decision to allow his organs to be harvested for transplant to Israelis. Six people received his heart, lungs, and kidneys, including a two-month-old infant. His mother, Abla, said, "My son has died. Maybe he can give life to others." [James A. Wallace, in *Feasting on the Word*, Yr. C, Vol. 3, p. 242-3]

Try to live your life like that. Jesus said, "Go and do likewise."

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