

Making God's Love Our Love

July 14, 2013

Luke 10:25-37

Sometimes the familiar can become the unknown. Some well-worn stories in the Bible elude us because we've heard them so often.

The Good Samaritan is a case in point. Most of us could retell the story from memory, and all of us understand the image. The Good Samaritan is somebody who goes out of the way to help the fallen one – the one in need – even at great inconvenience to self.

We even have Good Samaritan laws to protect one who stops to render aid from liability to prosecution should something go awry in her or his well-intentioned efforts.

But if this is just a morality tale about the importance of doing good deeds, then Jesus forgot his own message. You see, the lawyer whose question occasions this parable has a prior agenda.

He's not interested in Jesus or the message about God's reign. He wants to put Jesus to the test so that he can show him up. The lawyer begins by asking what he can do to inherit eternal life.

I'm sure most of us remember when the "Do-It-Yourself" fad started a number of years ago, and it continues for many people. Stores like Home Depot and Lowes are known to a lot of folks as "do-it-yourself" stores.

You can get most anything at these stores to fix, improve or build whatever you are inclined to tackle.

Many people have thought of religion in this way, as a do-it-yourself proposition. The lawyer in this parable bought into a do-it-yourself approach, which is really self-centered religion.

He was preoccupied with his piety and his destiny. He wanted another good deed on his resume, to ensure approval at the heavenly gate. His love was a self-love.

Jesus takes him on his own terms. He could have flat-out scolded the lawyer for having such a bad theology. He might have lectured him about what it really means to love and serve God. Lots of things Jesus might have said.

But Jesus always meets a person where he or she is. He begins by reviewing the law of God, encapsulated in the love of God and neighbor. Jesus even says, "Do this and you will live."

But can we, by our own strength, do these things? Can we love God with undivided hearts? Can we love others with total altruism, total unselfishness? If we could, then the cross was unnecessary.

Jesus is gently showing this man that he, like the rest of the human race, is unable to be what he ought to be, to love as he ought to love, and to act as he ought to act.

At this point the lawyer starts to squirm. His selfishness and failure to love others has been exposed. If he cannot obey God's law, do God's will from his heart, then he has truly fallen short.

And so Luke adds the telling observation: “But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’”

Most of us act with a certain measure of love and sacrifice toward those who are close to us, who love us back. We forego things and go out of our way to help our spouses, our children, and possibly our next-door neighbors.

But we find it far easier to help our daughter when her car breaks down than the anonymous stranger whose radiator is steaming on the shoulder of the interstate.

In Jesus’ story, the priest and the Levite have reasonable anxieties about helping this fallen man.

Fred Craddock, who teaches at Candler School of Theology, notes that the body on the roadside may have been planted by thieves in order to trap somebody who stopped to help. A lot of us hesitate nowadays to render aid for fear of being carjacked or attacked.

And I admit that it isn’t easy to make those kinds of decisions, particularly when we read of all the bad stuff that happens to people who are trying to be helpful.

You know – we kinda’ have this nagging feeling that as a Christian we really ought to stop and help, but, well, Jesus probably didn’t really mean that I should put myself at risk.

No doubt most of us have experienced a situation like that at some point.

But the really scary thing is that Jesus probably DID mean exactly that. Maybe that’s at least a part of what dying to self is all about.

Let me share something with you that happened to me. Many years ago I worked for several seasons as play-by-play announcer for the Lenoir Rhyne College sports network. Late one night I was driving back from Newberry, SC after broadcasting a game with Newberry College.

It’s somewhat different now, but back then, there were long stretches of nothing between Newberry and life as we know it. I was on a deserted highway, but was needing gas, so I was happy to find a little place open that was selling gasoline.

I pulled in, and as I was filling my car, these two big, burly rough-looking guys came up to me out of the shadows and asked if I was going to Clinton, which was another little town up the road.

Well, I did have to go through Clinton, and I guess I could have lied about it, but I didn’t, and these guys said they needed a ride as far as Clinton and would I take them.

Well, honesty compels me to tell you that I really didn’t want to do that, and the feeling wasn’t helped by the comments from some of the folks, including the proprietor of the store, who whispered things to me like, “better watch out,” don’t do it.”

But, I don’t know, maybe it was something I had been studying or reading or thinking about recently, but I just had this feeling that this is what Jesus is talking about, this is what we are really called to do. So, in spite of my misgivings, I told the guys, OK, sure. Hop in

Well, I have to tell you that the drive to Clinton was one of the most unnerving experiences I can remember. I was uptight the whole time, wondering if at any moment I might feel a gun in my ribs or who knows what. But, we got to Clinton, they told me where to stop, thanked me and got out. End of incident.

I have thought about that often as the reality of what Jesus taught about serving our neighbor and who our neighbor is. No credit to me mind you – I've already admitted that I was scared to death. But maybe Jesus meant that this really is what it's all about.

But back to our gospel lesson – Jesus did cut the Priest and Levite some slack in the minds of his hearers. And there was another out for them that his hearers would have known but that many of us don't pick up on and certainly would never face.

They could have thought the man by the side of the road was dead. And touching a corpse would have made the priest and the Levite ritually unclean under Jewish law and disqualified them from ministering in the temple.

So at least the Priest and the Levite had some excuses that they could fall back on. Excuses that might seem legitimate.

And I think this point is often missed when this parable is considered. Yes, they might have had some excuses that seemed reasonable, at least to them. But I suspect this is a point Jesus wanted to make.

Isn't this just like us a lot of the time. You and I can come up with all sorts of rationalizations for not doing what we should be doing as Christ's followers – rationalization that seem perfectly legitimate to us.

But I believe Jesus' point here is that those rationalizations won't fly with him and with the Heavenly Father. We are called to sacrificial service, called to determine how we can serve, not why we can't.

Then next in the story comes the Samaritan. And, of course the reason that Jesus deliberately makes him a Samaritan is, I think, clear to us, even though a lot of folks who use the term "Good Samaritan" to describe someone who does good things have no idea about the historical setting or context.

As we know, the Jews and the Samaritans were bitter enemies.

Without going into a lot of detail about that this morning, I'll just mention that the Samaritans claimed that theirs was the true religion of the ancient Israelites prior to the Babylonian Exile, and that Judaism as practiced by the Jews was a related but altered and amended religion brought back by those returning from the exile.

To say that the Jews and the Samaritans didn't get along would be a gross understatement. There was an intense dislike on each side for the other group. So for Jesus, addressing a Jewish audience, to make a Samaritan the good guy would really drive his point home in no uncertain terms.

In the story the Samaritan goes far out of his way. Fred Craddock, whom I mentioned earlier, says in his book, *Luke: Interpretation*, published by John Knox press, that he "delayed his own journey, expended great energy, risked danger to himself, spent two days' wages with the assurance of more, and promised to follow up on his activity"

Jesus is teaching in this parable that if you want to save yourself, transcend yourself. Transform yourself from a taker to a giver. Come out of your selfishness and become sacrificially preoccupied with the needs of everyone you meet.

It calls to mind another self-made man who came up to Jesus and asked how to earn eternal life. Jesus took him through the commandments and then, looking at his sharkskin suit, Rolex watch, and limousine, said "Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven."

When Jesus explained this, he added a comment, which sheds brilliant light on that episode and the encounter with the lawyer: "What is impossible for mortals is possible for God" (Luke 18:27). With humans it is impossible. A leopard cannot change its spots; we cannot transform ourselves. But Christ can transform us.

Lots of great lessons in this parable. But we really haven't come to the kicker yet. The kicker is that Jesus ends it by saying, "Go and do likewise."

Karl Barth, the great Swiss theologian, declares that in the truest sense, Jesus is the Samaritan who shows mercy to the one left for dead on the roadside.

In *Church Dogmatics*, Barth writes that Jesus alone could act as neighbor to the fallen ones, fulfilling to the ultimate the twin commands to love God and others. But he did all that for us.

And it is in and through Christ that we can act in deeds of love and kindness. That is why the gospel of Jesus is not "good advice" but "good news."

We are to love as Jesus loved. And how is that? Look how Jesus loves us - when he goes to a new town he doesn't immediately love his friends or even go to the latest thing that is on but rather he makes a beeline to any need that God puts before him.

Even things that are ugly and apparently unsolvable like a lunatic living naked in a cemetery in a place called the Gerasenes Jesus doesn't ignore but he goes and tends to the man's needs, and the result of this incredible love is incredible for we read that the man went away and began to tell how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed.

When Jesus loved like this it led to an explosion of publicity for him. What the world needs today is an explosion of publicity for what Jesus can do.

What the story of the Good Samaritan reveals is that you and I have the keys to this kind of love in our hands. Next time you bathe the wounds of someone who no-one else cares for - visit someone who is lonely and lost - spend time listening to a story that you've heard a hundred times before. Understand this you are doing it - not to that person but to God Himself.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a man who died for opposing Nazi Germany said "Adherence to Jesus allows no free reign to desire unless it is accompanied by love. To follow Jesus means self-renunciation and absolute adherence to him."

Some will say that - "I am too busy to practice sacrificial love like that" I looked up busy in a Bible concordance and it appears only twice in the New Testament but never once does it appear even as a possible reason to not obey God in this matter.

Friends if we want to see this church and our area change for Christ, if we want to fulfill our vision which is to be a caring Church family who will do whatever it takes to help people to become wholehearted followers of Jesus Christ. then we will need to reach out beyond our comfort zones into lives that we had previously avoided with the compassion and healing love of Christ. Nothing else will do.

Someone has written:
To love the whole world
For me is no chore;
My only real problem's
My neighbor next door.

There is a distinct ethical content to this story of the good Samaritan. The Christian life is a life of self-sacrifice and neighbor-love. But it is not undertaken autonomously. It begins at the foot of the cross and is carried out in the company of the Crucified One, by whom alone we can live such a life of love. The parable of the good Samaritan is not just a call to imitate Jesus. It's a call to participate in him.

"Go and do likewise," he said. And I do believe he was serious.