

Who Is My Neighbor?

The Good Samaritan

Luke 10: 25-37

August 26, 2018

I was in a conversation recently where the Good Samaritan story came up. I was talking with a self-identified Catholic, a lay person not a priest, and we started discussing immigrants and refugees and the debate on what should be done, how welcoming we should be. We talked about the positions of some leaders who openly talk about their own Christian faith. The drop the mic line in the conversation was when this Catholic said to me, “what part of The Good Samaritan Story do they not understand?”

What was interesting to me in that conversation was that the Good Samaritan story was the reference point. The story was the judge of what is happening around us and what is right and wrong. In the same way that some Christians can quote Bible verse after bible verse, this Catholic quoted this story to me. And it sprung to mind like an elevator speech of what Christianity is about and how Christians ought to be. I got the feeling that if this person were to go to a sporting event with a billboard with a hope of getting on camera with a Bible verse to share with the masses, it wouldn't be John 3:16 like you sometimes see behind the goalposts at football games, it would be Luke 10: 25-37, hoping that someone would open up a Bible and say, “oh, so that's the meaning of life.”

The Good Samaritan story is an anchor story for us, a foundational story and it should be. And, the story is filled with surprises.

This is the second week in our series, Surprising Stories of Jesus. From now until the end of September we will be listening to significant stories of Jesus from the Gospel of Luke. In each of them, Jesus does something surprising, or surprising things happen because of Jesus. These stories will remind us of the themes at the heart of Christian life and at the heart of the Bible. They will challenge us. That is what the stories of Jesus do.

A lawyer tests Jesus, challenges his honor. It is a public, high stakes game. There is no distinction between secular and sacred in Jesus time, so the lawyer is an expert in the

scriptures, in the faith. He asks, “how do I inherit eternal life,” which means, “how does one get into the new age to come?” This was not belief in a heaven far away but a new age on earth. The believe was that through the messiah God was going to usher in a new age of a restored earth where life is just and whole as God wants it to be.

The lawyer is asking, “what do I do? How do I get there? I think we can translate this question for us saying, “what is most important”

Jesus turns the scripture expert back to the scripture saying, “What is written in the law?”

The lawyer recites two pieces of scripture, first the Shema from Deuteronomy 6: 4-9, words that were to be recited twice a day, “you shall love the Lord your God with all you heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all you mind.” And then the lawyer adds Leviticus 19:18: which is new, a religious innovation, and “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

In the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, Jesus calls this the Great Commandment.

These three loves are the center of the Christian faith. Love God: love all that is sacred, holy, and loving. Appreciate all that is given and practice to keep the heart open, to maintain and deepen this appreciation. That’s what we do in worship, our primary spiritual practice. That’s what we do in prayer and study.

Love your neighbor: treat people around you with dignity and respect.

And, love yourself. This commandment assumes that we will love ourselves, that we will treat ourselves well, with dignity and respect too. Much of Christian faith is focused on inviting us to accept God’s unconditional love, let go of our shame, and then live fully and freely. Then we turn this love outward.

All three loves are central to Christian faith and they interact with each other.

Jesus says, “Do that, and you will live.” You will be paying attention that what is most important, you will enter the new age. Don’t worry about it.

The lawyer still hopes to catch Jesus. He says, “And who is my neighbor?”

What a question. It might be THE question right now. Our nation is pulling at the seams as we wrestle with this question. “Who should be included? Who has worth? Am I included? If I am, can I really trust that I will still be ok if I include someone else too?” Our current answers to these questions are tearing at our neighborhoods and people’s lives. Immigration Customs and Enforcement agents (ICE agents) have been active in Northfield the last few weeks. They have detained two individuals on a deportation list. According to Father Denny, the priest at St. Dominic’s, one woman detained to be deported a few weeks ago has four children at home and her husband has stage 4 cancer. This week, an individual was detained to be deported in the Dairy Queen parking lot. He had been living in Northfield since 1997.

Scholar R. Alan Culpepper writes, “like most societies, first century Judaism was ordered by boundaries with specific rules regarding how Jews should treat Gentiles or Samaritans, how priests should relate to Israelites, how men should treat women and so on... The command to love one’s neighbor immediately prompted the lawyer’s question, which was understood to define the limits of required neighborliness.” In other words, “what are the limits, how far do we have to go?”

Jesus was consistently challenging his society’s limits on neighborliness. Jesus tells this story to challenge the limits to neighborliness once more.

The surprises this story posed in the first century are still surprises today. We expect a priest to help a man who has been beaten and robbed and is dying. We expect a Levite, an assistant to priests, to help the man too. Both pass by.

We expect the third person to help, that’s how stories normally go. But the listener would have been surprised to be drawn into a story where a Samaritan becomes the hero.

There was hostility between Jews and Samaritans. Samaritans were seen as unclean people. Samaritans were descendants of mixed marriages that followed from the Assyrian settlement of the Northern Kingdom of Israel after it fell. They were not pure. How often do human beings have arguments about who are the real insiders, who meet the qualifications, who is fully human here?

Jesus tells the story of an enemy, a despised one who becomes the clear hero. The Samaritan exhibits Jesus-like actions. He has compassion on the man; shows skill in bandaging and treating his wounds; sacrifices his own comfort for him by giving him his animal. He sacrifices two days wages for him. \$240 if you earn \$15 per hour, about \$500 if you earn \$30 an hour. He offers to pay more if it is needed.

The Samaritan proves himself fully human, one to admire, one to imitate.

Jesus asks the lawyer, "which of these was the neighbor?" It's like the lawyer can't even say the word "Samaritan." He says instead, "the one who showed mercy." "Go and do likewise." Jesus says.

So, "Who is my neighbor?" The neighbor is anyone in need of mercy, no matter who they are. But there's more happening in the story than that. Jesus' challenge to the lawyer is also clearly to say that the Samaritan, or anyone that we see as "less than" should be treated with mercy too. The lawyer, and others, should let go of their judgment. That was something Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Plain, "do not judge," and now Jesus works it into another story.

Jesus essentially erases all boundaries to neighborliness. And he shows us extravagant neighborliness.

There is an article on the front page of the Star Tribune today about a family from Honduras. The title of the article is "Fleeing Peril, Facing Unknown: A Honduran Family's Harrowing Ordeal Brought Them to Minneapolis." There's a beautiful photo of a Honduran family of five and a young white family of five at a large table saying grace before a meal. The caption under the photo reads, "The families of Honduran refugee Nuria Arias, and the Rev. Ry Siggelkow said a prayer."

I thought, “oh isn’t that nice. This pastor and his family are eating a meal with this Honduran family and taking a pretty picture for the Star Tribune.” But then as I read the article, I found out that this pastor’s family has invited this Honduran family into their home, to live.

The Honduran family lived at the boundary of two rival gangs in Tegucigalpa, Honduras. To avoid violence, business owners have to pay gang members weekly fees that can be as high as half a family’s income. One day, while in a relative’s restaurant, machine gun fire broke out and everyone had to drop to the floor. Violence intensified after the election of the Honduran president.

So, Arias and her children fled Honduras. They traveled through Guatemala, and Mexico, by bus, train, and boat. They claimed asylum at the U.S. border.

Meanwhile, the Sigglekow family, is Mennonite. If we ever look down on Mennonites as kinda weird as they are concerned about completely embracing popular culture, we might want to pay attention to that. The Sigglekow’s live in the Seward neighborhood in Minneapolis, and they put their name on a list of potential sponsors of families seeking asylum in the U.S. The two families connected by Facebook Messenger. On July 5, the Sigglekow family found out that the Arias family would be released from detention the next day. Sigglekow bought the family one way airline tickets from the border to Minneapolis and picked them up from the airport.

Now the families share food, clothing, games, songs and prayers. They will be together for a while. On average it takes two years for asylum cases to be processed.

As I read this article, I thought, “what part of the Good Samaritan story does this family not understand?”

Being merciful towards those whom many despise. Showing mercy with extravagance. Allowing neighborliness to cross boundaries.

We are invited to allow the story of the Good Samaritan to shape our point of view, and to shape our lives and our actions. Amen.

