

Loving Neighbors

This story of Jesus, known as the parable of the good Samaritan, is arguably one of the best known of all the stories of Jesus that we have in the Bible. It is so well known that it has taken on a life of its own at least as far as the term “good Samaritan” goes. Good Samaritan is a term that is used to describe a person who goes above and beyond in showing mercy or kindness to someone, or in offering needed assistance.

This term has even found its way into the legal and judicial system with laws that bear this term. Good Samaritan laws are enacted to protect a person from some kinds of legal liability who offers aid to a person in need. For the most part good Samaritan is a positive term that evokes a sense of awe for one observing such a person and sometimes even pride in one who labels him or herself as a good Samaritan.

This is all well and good, but there’s something that wears a bit thin when limiting our understanding of a good Samaritan to simply one who chooses to offer assistance. I’ve sometimes heard things said along the lines of “I should have been a good Samaritan, but I was in a hurry, or I was uncomfortable with the situation.” Or I’ve heard some say, “I’m just not the good Samaritan type. I knew that somebody else who would come along to offer help.” When I hear things like this I’m thinking that the reason Jesus told this parable is for more than just encouraging his listeners to choose the option of being exemplary helpers in times of need. In fact, there is a whole lot more to this parable than this one layer of meaning. So let’s take a closer look.

At the outset, a parable is a particular form of story that is told in order to teach or instruct by making listeners stop and consider its implications for their lives. Therefore each of the characters in a parable have a parallel in the real life context of the listeners. So equally important to the content of the parable itself is the audience to whom the parable is being addressed.

Jesus tells this parable in response to a question he was asked by a lawyer he encountered. A lawyer in the time of Jesus was a person who was a religious scholar. A lawyer was one who studied, knew and understood the full extent of Jewish religious law. For Jews of Jesus’ time, the demarcation between religious law and civil law was blurry if not nonexistent.

So when he asked Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” he was really engaging Jesus in what we might call banter; because he knew full and well the answer to the question he was asking Jesus. It’s almost as if he wanted to show off his religious law prowess.

Jesus who was quite keen on such banter, didn’t miss a beat with his own question in reply, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” You can almost see the pride in the lawyer’s face as he recites the law. “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.” Jesus only stokes the man’s pride when he commends him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

With this then as a prequel to the parable, the self-satisfied show-off lawyer wants to show off just a bit more. We read, “wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’”

Jesus then tells the parable of the good Samaritan in which a man who was traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho is attacked by robbers who leave him half dead alongside the road. The first two people to come by, a priest, and a Levite, both see the suffering attacked man and pass by him offering no assistance of any kind. Both the priest and Levite, by the way, were devout Jews and yet did nothing to aid the man who was dying. It's not until the third person who happens by that any help is offered. And when it is, it is a Samaritan who attends to the suffering man in every way possible including covering the full out-of-pocket expenses associate with his recovery.

What is shocking to Jesus' listeners is that it is a Samaritan who offers compassion. As far as the Jews were concerned, Samaritans were second-class citizens who were not living fully as the one true God commanded. The Samaritans knew they were despised by the Jews and were therefore not on good terms with them. And yet, in his parable, it is the Samaritan who does everything he can to help the man in need.

Jesus then closes the parable with a question to the lawyer. "Which of these three, do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" And when the lawyer responds that it was the Samaritan, he tells the lawyer to "Go and do likewise."

At that point the lawyer was probably thinking to himself that he was sorry he asked. And then left like a dog with its tail between his legs.

Once again, Jesus is broadening the extent of God's love and care beyond the constraints that humans had conscribed around it. And furthermore, it was not only the objects of God's love that had been expanded, it was also a massive expansion of the objects of the love that we're to share with the world.

Through the telling of this parable, Jesus was challenging his listeners then, as well as us listening to him today, to become fully aware of the complete extent of the love that we are to extend to our fellow human beings. And in a nutshell, as the love shown by the Samaritan smashed all human barriers and borders erected by human pride, those barriers and borders that we erect today that demarcate, delineate, and discriminate are all to be torn down. God's love knows no distinctions. And God's love that we have to share must also have no distinctions. It's really very simple and straightforward.

And yet today, 2000 years after Jesus first told this parable, we find ourselves in a very similar predicament as we consider the question of who is my neighbor.

This weekend, I attended what was billed as the first annual "Faith, Science and Climate Action" conference here in Bozeman. Over 150 people—scientists, academics, students, faith leaders, people of faith and people of no faith—primarily from our region but with some attendees from as far away as Anchorage, Alaska. Lethbridge, Alberta, and Sidney, Montana gathered to collaborate, learn and celebrate our call to care for the earth our home. While it was at times sobering, it was an uplifting and inspiring event that provided us with a sense of hope for the future that is in our care as we were called to action in bringing about needed changes to ensure that the future will provide for the care of the earth's inhabitants.

Climate scientist Katharine Hayhoe, a professor at Texas Tech University, and devout evangelical Christian, was a keynote speaker in a live webinar yesterday morning. She began her presentation by stating that as a Christian she believes God's first and greatest gift to us is the gift of his son Jesus who is the embodiment of God's perfect love for us. There is no gift of God that is greater

than this amazing gift. She went on to then argue that God's second greatest gift to us is the earth, our home. It is a gift that provides for our every need as human creatures. It is truly an awesome wondrous gift given out of God's love. It was from this starting point that she then went on to make a compelling case for us as Christians to love the earth as we care for it.

My ears perked up at one of the workshops I attended on the possibility of congregations installing solar electric systems, when one of the presenters referenced our call to 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. He then went on to say that in Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan perhaps we could consider that earth itself is our neighbor and therefore the object of our love. His suggestion got me thinking about this sermon and how we today might be having out assumptions about who neighbor is blown out of the water similar to the assumptions of that lawyer questioning Jesus had about who neighbor is.

My friends, the more I have pondered this story of the lawyer's interaction with Jesus and of how Jesus responded to him, the more I am feeling that we're more like that lawyer than perhaps we'd like to admit. If not all of us, then some of us anyway, perhaps have fallen into a comfortable assumption that we know what's what and who's who in the midst of the complicated world in which we live today. We can get swept up with assumptions about who the good people are and who are not. We can get swept up with what's right and what's not based more on civil and societal norms and practices that are no longer congruent or consistent with Christian principles.

What a gift it is then that we have the ministry of Jesus to return to when we can get retooled and re-tuned as we're renewed by the old stories that we thought we knew so well. The story of the parable of the Good Samaritan is one such story that reminds us that neighbor is a term that is much bigger, broader, deeper, and higher than ever. And that loving neighbor is a much more profound call to us as we extend love to that neighbor.

This year in which we've committed to Learning and Living God's Love, Together is proving to be a wonderful opportunity for renewal and recommitment as we seek to be God's people in this 21st century context. I believe that God is providing us with a tremendous opportunity to be a powerful and effective force for positive change in the world. It is for each of us to embrace this call as we redouble our efforts to extend God's love to the neighbor in ways that we may never have thought possible.

I look forward to continue on this journey together as we discover where it is that God is calling us to go. As we do, let each of us 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.