

Love's Lessons

There are some stories that work their way in us throughout our lives. This is one of them, or at least it ought to be. The “good Samaritan” is part of our cultural lore. We have the “Good Sam” RV club, “Good Sam” roadside assistance, “good Samaritan” laws, and Good Samaritan Hospitals—all of which assume we know the biblical story of offering help to the person in need. But more than just understanding these biblical allusions, we need to return to this story throughout our lives to let it work its way in us. This can be a transformative story if we allow.

It is a foundational story for children learning the way of Jesus, a basic lesson about love. We all want our children to develop empathy for others, and to learn to show compassion. We want kids to be contributing members of a caring community. Empathy is a gateway to social and emotional growth, and a story is better than a rule to help internalize this. So as children, when we hear this story it's clear who we are to feel sorry for, and who are the bad guys and who are the good guys. The robbers and the heartless passers-by are bad guys. The Samaritan is the good guy. We want to be good persons, too, so we should feel sorry for those who are hurt and help them get better. We shouldn't beat up other people, and we shouldn't walk away when someone needs help.

For a young child, that's a good lesson to learn about love, and ethics. But as we grow older, and the world is more complex than “good guys and bad guys,” there's more to learn from this story. Sometime in that preteen stage, children start to sort into groups. Often the groups are friendship groups, based on common interests. But sometimes the groups have a negative edge. The cool group, or the popular group, the leftover group, or the left-out group. The rich group or the poor group. By the time middle school is in full swing, and then into high school, the social caste system of peers can be very powerful. And that's a good time to learn more about Jesus' story.

Such as “what's a Samaritan?” Oh, so in Jesus' day there was an “in group” and an “out group?” There were people who dressed differently, worshiped differently, spoke differently—and the groups didn't mix? Suddenly the young teen finds himself or herself in the story, thinking, I know what it's like to be looked down upon, or laughed at, or excluded. Or maybe, I'm in the “in” group and I don't want to risk losing that status because I have a feeling it would be pretty uncomfortable to be in the “out” group. And pretty soon the shock value of the story, so obvious to its first hearers, begins to resonate. Maybe this isn't just a nice little story intended to teach us to be kind to one another. It's easy to be kind to someone in my group. . . but this story is saying that God's law tells us to be kind to EVERYONE, even those not in our group. That's not always so easy.

Yet still the parable is at risk of being a cliché, unless we take it to the next level. This past week our nation has been shaken by violence, violence laced with racial tension. Two more apparently unjustified deaths of black men at the hands of police officers led to peaceful protests—and then came the horror of a sniper shooting to death 5 officers and injuring 7 more, a man who professed a desire for retribution, a desire to kill white police officers. Why is this happening, and how can we stop it? We thought we had race relations sorted out. Certainly we've moved beyond slavery, beyond Jim Crow, and of course everyone understands that civil rights are for all. But once again race relations in America are demanding our attention. Can the story of the Good Samaritan help us?

That “in group” and “out group” stuff; the development of empathy; the commandment to love our neighbors—put on the lenses of minority racial and ethnic groups and recognize that our skin color dramatically affects the way we experience the world. Those in the dominant group and those in the minority do not have the same perspective, because they do not have the same experience. Just ask a Native American in Montana. In first century Palestine, Samaritans rejected Jews when Jews traveled in Samaria—you can find that reflected a few verses earlier in chapter 9. A Samaritan village would not offer Jesus and his friends the expected hospitality, because Jesus and his friends were heading to Jerusalem. Jesus’ friends suggested that lightning bolts would be a good punishment for such rudeness. Thankfully, Jesus rejected that idea. But the road between Jerusalem and Jericho, the road where the good Samaritan story is set, was Jewish turf. A Samaritan traveling alone was taking a risk on that highway. The tension in relations sounds a lot like the American story, with its fear and violence between people of different races. This parable tells us we have a responsibility to cross social borders, to look at people with the kind of eyes with which God looks at each of us, and to treat people as we would want to be treated without regard to ANY of the distinguishing characteristics our culture tells us are defining. The good Samaritan is good not only because he cares for an injured man, but because the injured man is a Jew. He is “supposed” to hate this man. Instead, he loves him.

My friends, this foundational story of our faith is telling us that we need to do EVERYTHING we can to care for people who are on the other side of society’s fences from us. It wasn’t enough for the Samaritan just to feel pity for the man. He did something, he bandaged his wounds. But that wasn’t enough, either. He put him on his donkey, giving up his own seat, and walked alongside the donkey to the nearest inn. But he didn’t stop there. He took care of him through the night. And that wasn’t all. He gave money to the innkeeper, and promised to pay the entire medical and hotel bill. He took responsibility when clearly he had no obligation to do so. He was the good neighbor the injured man needed, when he needed it.

But did that heal the racial and religious divisions of first century Palestine? The more time we spend letting this story work its way in us, the more such questions arise. And then we realize—the question asked of Jesus was “Who is my neighbor?” Yet Jesus turned it around with a story which shows, not who is the neighbor, but who acts as a neighbor ought to act. And the model we are given to follow is the most unlikely person in our world. For the Jewish religion scholar, the Law expert, the most unlikely person was the unclean, despised, suspicious Samaritan. Who is the most unlikely person for you, today?

The racial and religious divisions of first century Palestine would be healed, Jesus is implying, not by one kind person helping another, but by the transforming of the minds and hearts of witnesses to this kindness. By the changed attitudes of people like the religion scholar who would see, “Hey, even though I’ve always thought and heard that Samaritans are no good, this one is so good that I am learning the meaning of God’s law from him.” My enemy has become my model. The outsider knows more about how to live the central teachings of my religion than I do.

Surely such powerful lessons of love can be part of the transformation of our society’s ills. We have much to learn from the “others,” the “outsiders” who are actually our neighbors. This lesson has been for me a powerful motivator in the interfaith work which has been increasingly important in my life and ministry in recent years—that from those who practice other faiths, I can learn better how to practice my own.

It is in the nature of a parable, however, to have multiple meanings. So I cannot leave this one here and risk having you think of this parable as a morality play only. There are still more levels to it. And a clue lies in the original question of the religion scholar. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

The question is flawed, according to nearly all Christian theology. There is nothing we can do, no action we can take to earn God's favor and the gift of salvation. It is a gift, freely given. We call it grace. But how is grace given? Through the love of God in Jesus Christ. And in the story of the good Samaritan, we receive a story picture of this love.

For we are people in need of salvation, healing, wholeness—like the man beaten by robbers and left half-dead on the side of the road. The harshness and injustice of the world conspire against us and beat us up. And those who are expected to help us are often so wrapped up in their own concerns that they fail to help. But they are only human, after all. It takes the compassion of the outsider, the one who comes from another world, who looks on us with pity and bends down toward us in mercy and healing. And so he does, providing the balm of kindness, lifting us up out of the ditches in which we find ourselves, where we will die without his help. Christ is the Samaritan in this story, who sacrifices his comfort and gives of himself so that we might live. He pays our debt. He is our Savior, the one who gives us eternal life.

And when we follow his lead, and act as the Samaritan acted, a neighbor to others in need, we discover that he is there, too. He is the one in the ditch, crucified. He is the poor one who needs lifting up. He is the compassion which grows in our hearts.

What must I do to inherit eternal life? The religion scholar was looking at the answer, face to face. He knew the words, love the Lord your God with all that you are, and love your neighbor as yourself. But the story Jesus told him helped him see that loving neighbors and loving God and living eternally with God are all the same. Mother Teresa, who was probably better at showing than at telling, nevertheless told it well when she said, "Because we cannot see Christ, we cannot express our love to him in person. But our neighbor we can see, and we can do for him or her what we would love to do for Jesus if he were visible." (*The Living Pulpit*, July -Sept 2002, p. 20) The key to eternal life is Christ, who opens the door for us now, in this life, as we love our neighbors as ourselves.

For in our neighbors we meet Christ, and in us our neighbors meet him, too. Christ is in the relationship of love. For God is love, and those who live in love live in God, and God lives in them.

And so we circle back to our foundations, the core truths of our faith. Karl Barth, the 20th century theologian who wrote volumes and volumes of long German sentences explaining the ins and outs of Reformed Christian thinking, also knew how to say it simply. When asked to summarize the essence of his faith, he replied, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

Go and do likewise.