

July 25, 2010
Calvin Presbyterian Church
Abbotsford, B.C.

Luke 10:25-37
Ephesians 2:1-10

“A New View of the Neighbourhood: the Merciful Samaritan”

This story is so familiar we have trouble hearing it. I hope to help with that today.

Last week, we began tracing Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem in Luke chapter 9. He’s on his way to the cross. He’s teaching his followers about discipleship and living in terms of the kingdom of God. This familiar story is part of a theological discussion. It’s vital that we keep that context in mind.

An expert in the Law stands up to address Jesus. “Lawyer” means he is a Bible scholar, not an attorney. He wants to test Jesus’ fidelity to the Law of Moses.

He asks, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” He thinks a righteous person is one who fulfills certain requirements in order to merit life after death.

In true rabbinic fashion, Jesus replies with a question. “What does the Law say?”

The lawyer’s answer is orthodox: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength and mind. And love your neighbor as yourself.” He is quoting from Deuteronomy 6 and Leviticus 19—a combination Jews knew as the Great Commandment. Jesus commends him: “Well done. Do that and you will live.”

But the man wants to be vindicated as righteous. He wants to know that he has fulfilled the requirements. He asks Jesus to clarify exactly who constitutes a “neighbor.”

He knows the tradition: God’s people owe hospitality and mercy to others within the covenant community. But that obligation does not extend to outsiders, to sinners, or to people clearly under God’s judgment. In his mind, the neighbourhood is tightly drawn and made up of people who look and sound like him.

Jesus answers this second question with a story.

“A certain man traveling down from Jerusalem to Jericho was surrounded by robbers who stripped him and beat him and left him half dead in the ditch.” The seventeen mile road from Jerusalem to Jericho was notorious. Caves offered gangs places to hide. Bandits regularly attacked travelers. People hearing the story knew the hazards well.

They would assume the victim was a Jew and hope help would come.

The details Jesus gives are important. The man was stripped. Clothing was one way to identify ethnicity. But it's gone. Dialect was another way to identify a person. But "half dead" means unconscious. The victim is bereft of both clothing and speech. How could anyone tell which group he belonged to?

Then, hope. "A priest happens along." Priests were upper class so we assume he is riding. But, seeing the naked and perhaps dead body in the ditch, the priest "passes by on the other side." Priests had duties which required maintaining purity. Contact with a corpse would disqualify him for a time. Contact with a Gentile was also problematic. And it's possible robbers are still nearby. He decides it's too risky. He hurries on.

The next traveler is a Levite. He's likely walking. He has a religious role, but his rules are not so strict as those governing the priest. Still, seeing the victim, he too passes by on the other side.

Jesus' audience expects the next person on the road to be a Jew who had been to the temple. They are completely unprepared for the next words out of his mouth.

"A Samaritan...came upon him..." "Oh, no," Jesus' hearers are thinking. "From bad to worse..." Now we are conditioned to associate the Samaritan with a kind stranger who stops to help when our car breaks down. Jesus' audience had no such connotation. Samaritans were viewed as unclean. They were enemies and outsiders. They were unworthy of receiving assistance from any Jew.¹

Like the priest and the Levite, the Samaritan sees the man in the ditch. But he does not pass by on the other side. Instead he gets personally involved. He is moved with compassion. Act by careful act, he undoes the violence of the robbers and the rationalized neglect of the religious leaders. He binds up his wounds; he pours on olive oil and wine, sacraments as first aid. He puts him on his own mount and leads him, servant-like, to an inn. There he cares for him through the night. The next morning, he gives the innkeeper enough money to provide for three weeks' care and promises to pay the innkeeper in full upon his return if expenses exceed that.

The Samaritan does not limit his neighbourhood or his compassion on the basis of law, tradition or convenience. Nor does he have in mind justifying his own righteousness and securing a reward like the lawyer. Instead, he, a rejected outsider, models the compassion of Christ.²

This is extravagant grace. Jesus' hearers are stunned. In their experience, people don't cross boundaries and enemies don't treat each other with compassion.

¹ Craig A. Evans, *Luke*, New International Biblical Commentary. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990, p.176.

² Roger E. Van Harn, *The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts, Vol. 3 The Gospels*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001, p. 371.

The lawyer had asked, “Who is my neighbor?” hoping the answer had manageable limits. Jesus now reframes that question, asking, “Which of these three proved to be a neighbor to the man in need?”

The lawyer cannot bring himself to credit a Samaritan with goodness. He replies, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus says, “Go and do the same. Make mercy your way of life. That is how you will enter into a life-giving relationship with God.”

Jesus points the lawyer and us to a lifestyle, not a list. He invites those who follow him to participate in the life of the kingdom, focused not on eternal reward but responding with mercy to the needs we see in the world around us. Life presents us every day with unexpected opportunities to show mercy. The opportunities are often messy, inconvenient, and costly. Sometimes they involve risk. We don’t get to define who deserves grace. We don’t get to decide whom God may use as an agent of grace.

In the Children’s Time, you saw pictures of children in Cambodia, Malawi, and Grenada. Presbyterians from Canada are ministering Christ’s mercy to those kids. Some of the kids have been rescued from the most horrific situations imaginable. Their needs are great. But so is God’s grace. I want to tell you more about Ratanak Foundation.³ Led by a Canadian from B.C., they work in Cambodia rebuilding communities ravaged by poverty, corruption, and predatory sex tourism. Lives are being reclaimed and made whole. Ministry in Malawi and Grenada, through Presbyterian World Service and Development, is making a difference in people’s lives. We get to share in that, by our prayers, our gifts, and in some cases, our personal and costly involvement. There is no telling where God might send us if we keep our eyes open and respond when we see the need.

One more thing. We are inclined to identify with the Samaritan. He is the good, helpful neighbor after all. But if we listen theologically, we will find ourselves in the ditch, naked and broken. We need grace. We cannot save ourselves. Christ comes to us with mercy. He binds up our wounds, pours on the sacraments of oil and wine, cares for us through the night, and places us in the company of others. He entrusts the church with the resources needed to continue the work until he returns.

We are called to be people of mercy. We need Christ’s grace to be people of mercy.

Paraphrasing Paul in Ephesians, “It is God’s intent to demonstrate in the ages to come the incomparable riches of his grace...And now, against all odds, we have been rescued by grace through faith, not by doing anything we could achieve on our own-- this faith, this life in grace, is sheer gift from God. We were powerless, as good as dead. But now God has made us alive together with Christ. Now we’re God’s work of art. God

³ <http://www.ratanak.org/>

is re-creating us in Christ Jesus for the purpose of doing good works which God planned and prepared in advance; let's live our lives on this basis" (Eph. 2:1-10).

This gift of grace allows us to enter into and participate in a life-giving relationship with God. God sets us free to serve, to be people who by our words and our lives demonstrate the good news of the kingdom.

Prayer:

Lord, help us to see our world as you see it, to be moved with compassion. And then, led by your Spirit, help us to be bold and creative in our response.

In Christ's name, Amen.

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