

Sermon for Pentecost 5c
Proper 10c
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Trinity on the Hill Episcopal Church
Los Alamos, New Mexico
July 10, 2022

Deuteronomy 30:9-14
Psalm 25:1-9
Colossians 1:1-14
Luke 10:25-37

THE LESSON OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN

Today's Gospel presents us with the improbable parable of the Good Samaritan. What I'd like to look at here is the introduction to the story.

It reads:

"Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he said, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?'

Jesus said to him, 'What is written in the law? What do you read there?'

He answered, '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.'

And he said to him, 'You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.'

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'"

Some of you may know that I've spent a good deal of my life in school. I've always thought of myself as a good student, mostly because I studied a lot and usually knew the answers.

That's when we like to ask questions – when I know the answers.

That's the case with this lawyer who asks Jesus about what he has to do to inherit eternal life.

He knows the law; he knows the answer; so why does he ask it?

You see what I think is that he asks to check if Jesus knows what he knows.

He doesn't learn anything from Jesus in the answer. All he gets is the pat on the head for being a good student and knowing the right answer – a good mark in his permanent record.

Then comes the learning part – the lawyer asks a question to which he doesn't know the answer, and we enter into a whole new arena.

That's why I enjoyed my graduate schooling.

A grad student enters into studies that demand inquiry.

And in a sense, this lawyer is doing the grad student thing – asking a question for which he doesn't know the answer.

The text says he seeks to justify himself.

I've heard others preach what the lawyer really wants is to limit his "neighbor" to those who live next door, or at least in the same neighborhood.

But here he has stepped into the world of the unknown, and Jesus does not provide limits to the lawyer's duty, but rather expands it to the point of limitlessness.

In Jesus' definition, we are all, every last one of us on this planet, one another's neighbors.

The lesson for us in this exchange is that we need to learn to ask questions when we have no idea of the answers.

And we need to inquire of our duties to God and our Neighbor from the standpoint of expanding our understanding rather than limiting our responsibilities.

Inside the parable that Jesus uses to illustrate an expansive relationship with the world, there are a cast of characters.

Many of us may identify with the Priest or the Levite who find the sight of the robbed man disturbing enough to avoid contact.

I've heard it preached that these two are acting out of either a desire not to ritually soil themselves, or the suspicion that this is just a setup, a trap, to lure them into the danger of being robbed themselves.

Personally, I think Jesus is saying: they just couldn't be bothered.

As good Christians, we more than likely tend to identify with the Samaritan. We all like to think of ourselves as doing good deeds.

We all do what we can, don't we?

The difficulty for us in understanding this parable is that the dichotomy of the Samaritan and the Jew has lost its meaning for us.

We associate the word "Samaritan" with Good.

In Jesus' day, among his people, there was no such thing as a "good Samaritan."

Just who Samaritans were back in the day was redefined for me in a recent issue of *Biblical Archaeology Review*.¹

Samaritans are still around today. They trace their origins to the northern tribes of Ephraim, Manasseh and Levi.

According to the Book of Second Chronicles they helped finance the rebuilding of the first temple under King Josiah, but were not allowed to help with the rebuild after the Babylonian exile because the returning Jews questioned the Samaritan claim to a common heritage.

According to Samaritans, they worship the same God as the Hebrews. The difficulty for Jews, though Samaritans are closely related, it's not the same.

Samaritans use the Pentateuch, the first five books of Moses, the Law. Jews use the Pentateuch, but they also adhere to the writings and the prophets.

Samaritans assert their Pentateuch is the true, unchanged version God gave Moses.

According to Samaritan tradition, the split happened in the 11th Century BC when the high priest Eli took the title from the rightful high priest and led the tribes of Judah and Benjamin away from the temple at Mount Gerizim near Shechem to worship in Jerusalem.

Shechem was the site where Joshua set up the stone pillar after the people chose to follow God, and was the center of worship in the promised land.

According to Jewish tradition, the split happened in the 8th Century BC under the Assyrian conquest when the ten tribes were scattered and the northern kingdom resettled with Assyrian colonists as told in 2 Kings.

To this day, Samaritans continue to worship at Mount Gerizim and observe their festivals, many of which, such as Passover and Sukkot, are shared by their Jewish neighbors.

¹ *Biblical Archaeology Review*, Summer 2022, Volume 48, No. 2, page 18; "BAR Test Kitchen: Samaritan Humus".

Back in Jesus' day, they did not get along.

To begin to understand the meaning of this parable we need to think of ourselves as not one of the subjects of the parable, but as the object – the victim.

Professor Amy Jill Levine, who teaches Old Testament and Jewish Studies at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, makes that assertion.

“We should think of ourselves as the person in the ditch and ask, “Is there anyone, from any group, about whom we’d rather die than acknowledge, ‘She offered help’ or ‘He showed compassion?’” More, is there any group whose members might rather die than help us? If so, then we know how to find the modern equivalent for the Samaritan.”²

So who would you NOT want to help?

Who do you think would NOT want to help you?

This could be a personal animosity – like the bully from school or an obnoxious neighbor; or it could be political – any two members of opposing political parties. How about Russians and Ukrainians?

Think in terms of our cultural lexicon.

I remember signs from my youth – from the 1950s – in Indianapolis at Riverside Amusement Park: “White Patronage Only.” Would a member of the Ku Klux Klan stop to help an African American – or vice versa

Or a couple of generations back: “Irish need not apply.” I know my great-great grandmother was Irish. Her family disowned her because she married an Englishman.

Or look to today’s world: Muslims, Sikhs, members of Al Qaeda or the Taliban.

Just substitute those persons, those names for Samaritan, and find the shock of seeing our prejudices exploded by a parable that has become a cliché.

Once you’ve reached that point, return to the Scripture and hear Jesus asking us as he asked the Lawyer:

“Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?”

² Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2006), 148-9, as quoted in *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 3*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press) 242

The lawyer said, 'The one who showed him mercy.'
Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'"

Amen.