

Go and Do
Luke 10.25-37
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The parable of the Good Samaritan may be the most widely recognized story Jesus told. It is so widely recognized that many people may not even know that this story is attributed to Jesus. The loose use of the term "Good Samaritan" has degenerated into meaning anyone who comes to the aid of another. Is that all Jesus was doing with this story? Was Jesus reminding us to be altruistic and to be helpful when we come across people in trouble? Was Jesus giving us a parable so that we would feel guilty when we come across a homeless person? Or could it be a more pointed meaning: "Be nice like the Samaritan, not nasty like the clergy."

I am all for helping others. I am for helping those who depend on the kindness of strangers. But you must know that there is more to this story than only being kind to strangers. This is a story for everyone who recognizes that we are on a journey. Our journey is not the crude expression, womb to tomb. Our journey is from birth to rebirth. Our journey is from partial life to abundant life.

Think about the setting of this story. Jesus is on his journey to Jerusalem. The phrase Luke uses in chapter nine is, "He set his face to go to Jerusalem." Jesus is on his way to his death when this expert on the Law of Moses wants to know how to have life. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Luke tells us that the lawyer was testing Jesus. Over the millennia of the church this line has been understood various ways. Some hear this "testing" as hostility, as if the lawyer is attempting to entrap Jesus. Others hear this "testing" as an expected part of rabbinic dialogue. Perhaps Luke puts the question in the mouth of the lawyer that many of us want to ask, "What must I do to have eternal life?" Many of us are more like the lawyer in the story than we want to admit. We also want the list of requirements for eternal life spelled out. Maybe we could manage Ten Commandments for eternal life. We calculate that we can probably keep this short list of ten requirements in order to earn eternal life.

The catchy part of the question and answer exchange is that when Jesus acknowledges that the lawyer has given the correct answer, Jesus says, "do this." The problem the lawyer has is that he can obey only if he knows exactly who his neighbor is. Over the years when I have been doing a Bible study on Luke and we come to this parable, I ask the class members to identify with one of the characters. Rarely does anyone pick the lawyer. I think most of us are the lawyer. The law has become our Gospel. We seek refuge in rules. We glorify boundaries. We codify our membership requirements and somehow we make discipleship a requirement. By asking Jesus to define neighbor, the lawyer is setting limits. Precisely whom am I to love? If I can narrowly define who my neighbor is then I remain in control. The lawyer's question goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden. When I narrowly write all of the rules, then I can live under the illusion of knowing good from evil, rather than living my life with its intended purpose -- to know God and God's mercy.

Jesus is on his journey to his death. The lawyer asks Jesus about life and Jesus tells a story about a journey. It seems there was a man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho. This unnamed traveler leaves David's city of peace, perched upon the hill, to travel twenty miles through the wilderness to Jericho, which is on the edge of the Dead Sea. We think twenty miles is not even a trip. Some of you drive farther than that to get to church. I once lived in a place where I rode the bus to work. It took over 30 mins. It was easy, an airconditioned bus; a good book. I enjoyed the commute. Plenty of folks commute much farther every day. Of course, we would not think of walking that far. The traveler in Luke's story is either oblivious to the risk of his journey, or he has no choice. There is no safe way to get from Jerusalem to Jericho.

We all know what happens. The man is attacked by robbers, beaten and left for dead.

How often do you feel beaten and left by the side of the road half dead? The keepers of the tradition, that tradition by which we justify ourselves and wrap around us in order to feel safe; those keepers of the tradition simply walk past on the other side of the road. Something in our belief system is broken. Those others have a different definition of good and it does not compel them to love us as they love themselves. We have lived our faithful lives confined and channeled into those people who could someday return the favor. We have believed that those like us will love us. But it is the unlikely character who comes near, sees us, and is moved by outrageous love to care for us. In our memories and imaginations who could that person be? I can remember when the unexpected Good Samaritan would have been a communist or a Russian. Those bigoted stereotypes seem silly in the years following the Cold War, today, not so much. I remember the story of my Uncle Harry being broadsided by a drunk driver late at night and somehow the other driver fled the scene. My uncle is trapped in the car. His car catches fire. Late at night in Birmingham in the 1940s a lone dark figure rescues Uncle Harry. It was an unnamed African-American man.

If you are a Jew living in Israel, is the unexpected Good Samaritan a member of Hamas? In America today is the Good Samaritan a member of Al Qaeda, or ISIS, or a white Nationalist?

Probably the second most popular parable is the Prodigal Son. At the end of that story the older brother complains to his father about "that son of yours." He cannot bring himself to call him his brother. At the end of this story the lawyer cannot say the hated word "Samaritan." In reply to Jesus' question, "Which of these was neighbor to the man?" The lawyer says, "The one who showed mercy."

The actions of the Samaritan define neighbor. The compassion of the Samaritan stands against the unconcern of the priest and Levite. The Samaritan treats the traveler not as an enemy but as one dear to him. The actions of the Samaritan demonstrate the lengths to which love goes. Authentic love does not discriminate. Authentic love creates neighborly relationships. The lawyer wants to define who deserves his love. The parable Jesus tells suggests that love seeks out neighbors to receive compassion and care even when the established boundaries or prejudices conspire against it.

A few years ago I saw in the news a story about a 12 year old Palestinian boy who was shot by Israeli soldiers during a street fight in a village on the West Bank. The boy, his name was

Ahmad, was holding a toy gun. As soon as possible Ahmad was rushed to the nearest Israeli hospital. Two days later he died. Ahmad's parents made the decision to donate his organs. Six Israelis received Ahmad's heart, lungs and kidneys. One of the recipients was a two-month old infant. Ahmad's mother said, "My son is dead. Maybe he can give life to others."

To love God is to love neighbor is to love God. The ongoing flow of love allows eternal life to begin right now. This parable is a story for those of us on our journey. Think of it as a scriptural GPS, routing us in the only direction God desires – the way of love and compassion for others. The Good Samaritan is more than a sweet story about helping a stranger. This is a story about the transforming power of God at work in those who travel the dangerous roads of this world. We are on the journey to the fullness of life, life eternal, here and now. Jesus says to all of us, "Go and do."

