

Wesley United Methodist Church Rev. Beverly E Stenmark
July 14, 2019
Title: How to Be a Neighbor
Scripture: Colossians 1:1-6, 9-10
Luke 10:25-37

It probably wasn't always a good thing to ask Jesus a question. Typically, his answer might start out helping you feel good, but then it would take a turn that would prove challenging to your assumptions and way of life. That happened today to a lawyer – or probably better understood as someone who was an expert in understanding scripture. What followed is the very famous parable of the Good Samaritan.

Today we are familiar with the phrase “Good Samaritan” that is commonly understood to mean someone who stops to help a person in need. It has entered our culture so much that some hospitals bear the name “Good Samaritan”. In many places there are “Good Samaritan” laws to encourage people to give reasonable assistance to someone they believe to be injured or in danger without being afraid they will be sued by the person they tried to help. In Rhode Island a “Good Samaritan” law of 2016 means that even if a person is under the influence of illegal drugs, he or she cannot be arrested if they call for medical assistance for someone else who is experiencing an overdose.¹

You may think you know this parable pretty well and wonder what new thing can be said about it. At least that's what I thought. I've preached about this parable many times before, but in the past few weeks I have been led to some new ways of thinking about this parable – and I would like to share them with you.

The story starts off rather predictably, with a man being attacked and left by the roadside. The assumption would be that the man who was

attacked was Jewish. First a priest comes by, and then a Levite. Jews were descended from Jacob who had 12 sons. Those descended from his son Levi are called Levites, and some within that group, descended from Aaron may be priests. Most Jewish people would be descended from one of the other sons and were simply called Israelites.ⁱⁱ It made sense that the third person to come along would then be a regular Israelite, someone like those who were listening.

But Jesus, of course, throws a twist into the story and the person who comes along is a Samaritan. Jews and Samaritans considered each other to be enemies. It is the enemy Samaritan who stops to help the traveler. Amy-Jill Levine is a Jewish woman and a Professor of New Testament Theology at Vanderbilt University Divinity School. I have learned a lot about the culture of the Bible from reading some of her material. She notes that the “Jewish listeners would have been surprised that the priest and Levite failed to help, but they would have been even more surprised that the Samaritan provided care for the wounded man.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Why didn't the priest or the Levite stop to help? Most commentators make the excuse that the purity laws would have prevented them from stopping, and to some extent I always accepted that, although it didn't seem right to me. Levine emphasizes that the excuse of purity laws is just that, an excuse. Jewish tradition emphasized saving a life as always taking priority over any issues of purity.^{iv}

So why didn't the priest and Levite stop? Why did the Samaritan stop? “Martin Luther King Jr gave one of the best explanations for the men's failure to help. He proposed that the priest and Levite were afraid. They ask, ‘If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me, for there are

bandits on the road?’ The Samaritan asks the better question, ‘If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?’”^v

The parable ends with Jesus asking the lawyer, “Who was neighbor to the injured man?” Taken aback by the story and the actions of the Samaritan, and enmeshed in his culture, he is not even able to say that the Samaritan was the one who was neighbor. Instead he responded, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus responded, “Go and do likewise.”

This parable has become a framework for much Christian action and much of what we also call Christian mission. We have come to see Mission as going out and taking care of people who cannot take care of themselves. David Scott is the Director of Mission Theology for the General Board of Global Ministries for the United Methodist Church. He was at Annual Conference this year and is the author of a book called, “Crossing Boundaries, Sharing God’s Good News through Mission”.^{vi}

He devoted an entire chapter to the Parable of the Good Samaritan and much of what he said caused me to stop and pay attention. He challenged some very basic assumptions we often make about mission and provided a fresh look at this parable. A lot of what I want to share with you either comes from his book or is influenced by it.

When we think about neighbors, we tend to think about the people who live near us. They may or may not be people that we know. In Jesus day, neighbor meant something very different, so the lawyer’s question to Jesus, “Who is my neighbor” is significant. According to Jewish law we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. In Hebrew, the version of Leviticus that the lawyer quoted the word “neighbor” can also mean “friend”.^{vii} Ultimately Jesus’ answer to the question of “who is my neighbor?” or friend, shows someone totally unexpected being the answer to that question.

Scott suggests that the Good Samaritan – the enemy – didn't just help the traveler; he befriended the traveler and in doing so crossed a number of boundaries. Unless the man was unconscious, they probably talked on the way to the inn. He likely asked the man what happened, where he was injured. He stayed with the traveler that first night and took care of him. That means he stayed in the same room and likely even slept in the same bed which was not unusual for strangers staying at an inn in that time. They didn't have high rise Holiday or Ramada Inns with private rooms and bathrooms.

The Samaritan would have touched the man in order to bandage his wounds, and to help him onto the Samaritan's animal, and also as he took care of him that first night. His involvement is much more than simply seeing an accident and calling 911 as we continue to drive by.

The Samaritan also planned to come back, not only to pay any additional charges that he owed to the innkeeper for taking care of the man, but also to check on him.

Scott points out that the Samaritan and the traveler started out not only as strangers and potential enemies, but their interaction would have made them friends – people who could count on each other if a need arose in the future. It challenged and likely changed some of their assumptions about the other.

Scott points out that this parable is often used to justify a “needs-based” approach to mission where we look at what other people need, what they don't have. In this approach we tend to see people as “problems” in need of “solutions” that we can provide.

This separates the “haves” of those in mission from the “have nots” of those among whom we are in mission, and it overlooks other aspects of

their humanity. It tends to overlook the skills, abilities, knowledge and other assets that they may have. It makes it easy to see only the positive of those in mission and only the negative in those among whom they are in mission.

Scott reminds us to look at what Jesus doesn't say about the traveler. Jesus says that he fell into the hands of robbers, but he doesn't say that he was poor. In fact, the likelihood is that he wasn't. He likely had something that was worth stealing. Scott notes that "nobody steals your smelly ratty old t-shirt, dirty ripped jeans and \$1.47 of pocket change."^{viii}

He also points out that in the mind of the hearers, the traveler would have been Jewish and would have known God better than the Samaritan who was from a rival religious group. He might even have been coming from a religious festival in Jerusalem. Saying that a Priest and a Levite had also been traveling in this same direction might make this a likely possibility. So, this was not a case of a religious person helping a non-religious person.

Jesus doesn't say that the man did not have family or friends. He might have had many people who would have been willing to help him if they had only known; if he had been closer to home. He might have had a wife and children at home waiting for him and worrying about his absence.

The traveler's needs were situational. He was in need **because** he had been attacked and robbed. It had nothing to do with who he was in the rest of his life. His needs at that very moment were something beyond his control. Scott cautions that in often in our approach to mission, or works of mercy or charity, there is a tendency to mistake situational needs for pervasive needs. It is easy to assume that because someone needs help in one particular area, that they need help in many areas. That may or may

not be true. We need to be careful to see that a person has a particular problem but not as a person with nothing but problems.

We're all pretty good at this when it involves people we know. We are willing and eager to drive someone to the doctor when we know that person is very capable in many other areas. We understand temporary unemployment. We understand and easily make distinctions like this when we know people, but we may not be as good at doing this if we do not know the person or persons.

Scott points out that in "social psychology, there's something called the Fundamental Misattribution Error – we assume that people behave based on who they are, not the situation they are in."^{ix} If someone cuts us off in traffic, it is easy to assume the person is rude, rather than that the person is late for work and normally a good driver. It is important for us, at all times, to realize that being in a particular situation is not a reflection of someone's worth, competence or abilities. We need to see past the situation to see the positive aspects of who they are. We need to be careful not to overlook the many assets that people possess simply because they also have needs.

Equally as important is recognizing that each of us has needs as well. Only when we are able to admit to our own hurts, our own needs and shortcomings, are we able to experience the good news of God's love and healing where we most need it.

Paul Harvey was an American radio personality who used to have a popular show called "The Rest of the Story". It might be good for us to think about the Rest of this story. The likelihood is that the Samaritan did not continue to help the traveler forever. The man likely healed from his injuries and connected with his family and friends. Helping him did not

make them dependent upon each other for the rest of their lives although it is possible that a friendship might have developed between them.

When we become involved in any kind of Christian action, mission, act of mercy or charity, it is important to really listen to what the other person needs and not assume that we know. Sometimes the needs involve unjust social constructs that prevent people from really helping themselves. Sometimes we may benefit from those same structures and we need to consider our place in these structures and how we might first identify them and then work to change them.

Being neighbor means seeing past generalities that we or others may assume or promote. Being neighbor means seeing others as people with hopes and dreams just as we have. It means seeing them as parents who love their children and will do whatever they can to help take care of their children, just as we would. It means seeing them as someone's parent who deserves to be cared for in old age just as we would want our parents to be cared for. It means seeing a child as a person with great possibilities if we will only help provide the circumstances that allow a child to flourish.

Being neighbor means taking Martin Luther King Jr's question seriously and instead of asking, "what will happen to me if I do something to help?" and ask the better question: "If I do not stop to help, what will happen to this person?"

ⁱ <https://www.ri.gov/press/view/26708>

ⁱⁱ The Jewish Annotated New Testament, 2nd edition. Commentary on the Parable of the Good Samaritan

ⁱⁱⁱ Levine, Amy-Jill & Sasso, Sandy Eisenberg. Who is My Neighbor? Flyaway Books, Louisville, KY, 2019 In "A Note for Parents and Educators".

^{iv} Ibid. Also noted in the Commentary cited in note ii.

^v Ibid

^{vi} Scott, David W. Crossing Boundaries, Sharing God's Good News through Mission. 2019. He includes an entire chapter on the Parable of the Good Samaritan, and it has influenced much of my thought here.

^{vii} Ibid, p. 31

^{viii} Ibid, p.38

^{ix} Ibid, p.39