Beloved story – goofy camp skits – teach compassion

Pentecost 5, 2025; Luke 10:25–37; Deuteronomy 30:11–14
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What do we make of this paradigmatic story—so paradigmatic that the term "Good Samaritan" has entered into our everyday language to describe those who attend to people needing assistance, support, or help in a crisis. In fact, there is an organization here in NC that was quite prominent in the weeks after Helene called "Samaritan's Purse."

Yes, this morning's gospel reading is one that has come into our everyday lives in ways that few others have. So much so that we've lost the "edginess" that the story would have carried in back when Luke's gospel was brand-new and a different set of geo-political dynamics was in place.

it is clear that Luke's Jesus wants to condemn the Levite and the Priest for not stopping to help the man in the road. They were…

And it is clear that we are supposed to think that they are pompus and snooty: too stuck up to even care about a fellow human being suffering or perhaps too busy or pre-occupied in their own lives to interrupt their day with the "annoyance" of stopping. Perhaps, even, they thought that since they were upstanding citizens, pillars of their community—they gave extra bits to the organizations that helped fellow-citizens who were in crisis. They had done their job at home—and now traveling away from Jerusalem, down a road (the Jericho) road that was dusty and hot—full of perils like the bandits that had overtaken the injured man—they just wanted to get to their destination as quickly and safely as possible.

Or maybe even, they wanted to stop, but weren't sure what to do or how they could help or whether there was anything they could do for the injured man. After all, they were Judeans in Samaritan territory. That would be like wearing Duke basketball fan gear to a UNC Basketball game when Duke wasn't even playing that day. Judeans and Samaritans had been enemies for centuries at that point—each accusing the other of failure to honor God correctly. The Judeans worshipped God at the temple in Jerusalem—a temple built after they returned from exile in Babylon in the 5th and 6th century BCE. Their ancestors had fought against Antiochos Epiphanies IV to become independent rulers in the 3rd century BCE. And now, they were under threat of a Roman take-over. Indeed, the Judeans had their own worries.

And their "neighbors" across the border were the Samaritans. The Samaritans worshipped God, too. They just did so on Mt. Gerazim rather than Mt. Zion. They were the ones who stayed when the Persians took the Judean leaders into exile in the 6th century BCE. They continued life under the Persian regime. They did not have a temple on their holy mountain—which meant they didn't have much that the Persians could loot—but they did know what it meant to live as people governed by forces that they did not create. They knew, also, what it meant to have their nearest neighbors be hostile toward them.

The Samaritans, even though they'd been on their land longer, were not recognized by the Judeans as righteous people. They were dangerous people. People who did not write Hebrew with the same set of letters. People who did not speak Aramaic with the right accent. People who didn't seem to know Greek like properly educated people should.

But in this morning's gospel, it is clear that the Samaritan is to be celebrated. A reviled enemy of the other two travelers, he is the one who stops to help an injured man whom he has never met—a man whose status as a Judean or a Samaritan we don't even know. Our "Good Samaritan" bandages and cleans this man's wounds, takes him to shelter, and ensures his care until he recovers.

And so, when the Lawyer who questions Jesus in this morning's Gospel, asks Jesus "who is my neighbor?" and Jesus answers with a story about a fictional Judean priest and Levite juxtaposed against a Samaritan—and the Samaritan is the hero of the story? Well, that's political tinder for a fight.

But Luke's Jesus has told the story in such a way that the answer seems crystal clear. And Jesus even asks the question in a way that sets up his final command. Jesus asks the lawyer "Who became neighbor to the victim?" Who *became* the neighbor. Jesus suggests, in the very way that he asks the question: A neighbor is not someone beyond ourselves. A neighbor is not the "other person" who needs our help or our pity or our charity. A neighbor is something *we have to become.* In other words, we do not choose who our neighbors are—we become neighbors apart from our status. Which one of the travelers became a neighbor? It is clear that the Samaritan did.

Yet, even as Jesus tells the lawyer and us to "go and do likewise," I've so often left this story thinking that the Samartian was unusual, extraordinary, extra-especially compassionate because he stopped even though he was the enemy—the foreigner in his own land, the feared outsider who was perceived as more dangerous than merciful. I've so often left this story thinking that I need to be on the lookout for opportunities to be a good Samaritan.

You see, there's something missing from Jesus's fictional story about this good Samaritan—it's the voice of the injured man. Now, Jesus paints the picture in such a way that the man may not be capable of speaking. Afterall, he'd been left "half dead" after falling into the hands of bandits. And while we know that his destination was Jericho, we do not know much else about him. Was he a Samaritan or a Judean? We don't know. Was he traveling for work? We don't know. Had he stopped to talk with the bandits, maybe even sought to do business with them? We don't know. Did he even *want* the Samaritan to help him? We don't know. But without the Samaritan becoming his neighbor, we might never have the opportunity.

Jesus' message isn't that we should be extra-especially compassionate when we remember that other people are our neighbors, when we feel guilty about the disparities in our world. Jesus asks us simply to become neighbors—to allow ourselves to become the ones who love God with all our heart and all our soul and all our strength and all our mind—so that we love ourselves enough to become a neighbor. To understand ourselves not as singular individuals, defined by our works of compassion or mercy, shaped not by our own effort to be good, but rather subsumed so thoroughly in the command to love God that we become neighbor—defined by our recognition that our actions require community, shaped by God's nearness in our hearts and on our lips, subsumed by becoming neighbor to God's beloved creation.

Here's where our first reading from Deuteronomy helps us to see a little more clearly how Jesus's call to become a neighbor plays out through us. Deuteronomy assures us that loving God is not too hard nor is God too far away. Loving God is

not a heavenly activity. It is not something for those far away across borders or oceans. Deuteronomy says that the word, the command to love God, is "very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe."

Neighbors aren't across fences or beyond the sky. Because God is so very near to each of us, neighbors are part of who we are—that's why becoming a neighbor is sometimes so difficult. You see, we are God's hands in our world...to care for the sick, feed the hungry, clothe the naked and comfort the lonely. We are Jesus hands. But we often find ourselves asking, along with the lawyer, who is my neighbor. Perhaps Jesus's point this morning—as he tells his Good Samaritan story and commands the lawyer to "Go and do likewise"— perhaps Jesus's point is not about choosing our neighbors. Instead of asking who is my neighbor, perhaps we need to ask another question: Who thinks I am the enemy? How can I become neighbor to that one?

Go and do likewise.