

The Good Samaritan, Again (Luke 10:25-37)

We stop by this familiar parable again

I think it was on Wednesday of this week that my thoughts paused to mull over again how it is that living, breathing human beings believe and think so differently. We are getting into the thick of a presidential election cycle so the decibel level is getting amped up, though of course we don't need a presidential election to feel the political heat. But really, how do people come to think and believe so differently?

In this vein I think about the simple thing we do in VORP mediations. We ask both the victim and the offender to express what the person on the other side of the table thinks. Can you really hear, and can you give authentically articulate how the other person sees the problem at hand?

So I'm waiting for the political debate where the candidates are asked to accurately and with conviction state how their opponent sees the world. Just that, this simple exercise, to me, would help me to understand if our candidates can even hear what their opponents are saying.

But back to us. What has shaped you? How did your family of origin mold you? What life experiences have forged you?

Now it is said that in a lot of ways "artists get there first." I believe Freud put it like this "everywhere I go I find a poet has been there before me." We have this painting of Paul Buxman's on our wall. Just a road up in the foothills, a fence alongside, the trees, the mountains in the background, the shadows and sun falling upon them. But, you know, you can look at this painting for awhile and it has the power to take you to another zone. How long have those mountains been there? Where does this road go? What's around the bend, just out of sight? Those flowers, they are present now, they will fade, they will return next year. There's something eternal and mysterious going on, right there on my wall, overlooking the dining room table.

And so it is with the parable of the Good Samaritan. This familiar tale, recorded only here in Luke's gospel, is so familiar, like a common scene in the foothills to the East, yet it has this eternal quality to it. When we think of what has shaped us, as Christian believers, as Jesus followers, we do well, I think, to say in response to the question, "what has formed you," to say that a lifetime of hearing the parable of the Good Samaritan has had a shaping influence upon me....I think it says a whole lot about who I am today.

A story from Afghanistan

Alfred and Gladys Geiser served with MCC and with Mennonite Mission Network in their younger years then ran a successful business in Ohio. In 2000 they felt called to go to Afghanistan where Al traveled out to villages to help equip the communities with hydroelectricity so that the quality of their lives could be improved a bit. He started out in the NGO world but eventually went into a partnership with an Afghan man to start a business to build turbines and pipes and all the various pieces needed to establish hydroelectricity plants in rural villages. They employed thirteen people.

Then in 2008 Al and his Afghan partner were kidnapped and held hostage. Al used his Afghan prayer beads as he would quietly recite the Lord's Prayer. He was offered a chance for release if only he would say the right words and thus convert to Islam. This offer he gently refused.

Many people prayed for him, though this ordeal was kept out of the public eye. After nearly two months he was rescued, I believe by U.S. military special forces, and he and Gladys returned to Ohio.

They were glad to be safe but Al wasn't content. His Afghan colleague was also, in due course, released, but Al had this uncomfortable feeling. I can go back to Ohio. My colleague can't. So, as Gladys puts it, Al soon concluded that "God didn't save him to be in a safe place in Ohio." Soon enough Al returned to Afghanistan. He would work for a few months, then return to Ohio. Back and forth he went, for a couple of years.

Al lived with an Afghan family. And the question would come up, why do you do what you do, why? His stock answer was, the parable of the Good Samaritan. *There was a traveler making the journey from Jerusalem down to Jericho. He fell victim to robbers, who left him half dead beside the road. A good priest came down the road, but couldn't bring himself to help out the half-dead traveler. Then a Levite approached, and he too passed by on the other side. But then along came a Samaritan. He did stop, bound up the wounds as best he could, and transported the man to the nearest inn. He made sure that the innkeeper would tend to him, and assured him that he would handle all the costs. Then Jesus concluded his parable by saying that this is how we all ought to do, go and do likewise, he said.*

Then in July of 2012, four years ago, Al and his partner left Kabul and went out to village to work on a hydroelectric project. They spent the night. The next day, while returning, they were stopped and shot dead. Gladys writes about the incident we still don't know why this happened. There will probably never be an answer. But we do know, she says, that God was with them through it all.

The story of the Good Samaritan, which Al liked to recount to his Afghan friends, didn't end up the same as Al's own life did. In Jesus' parable, the Samaritan sees and recognizes the need of the man on the other side of the road. Rather than walk away, averting his eyes, he draws close. He moves in close and exhibits compassion. He tends to the wounds. He lifts the man onto his own animal. He takes him to a place where he can get some help. There's this progression. Seeing and recognizing. Drawing near, not running away. Exercising compassion.

Al's life and his colleague's life, are dramatic examples of the complications of caring. We all know this. While I was in the middle of composing this sermon I got a call from a woman in Reedley. Suddenly I'm in this web of disabilities and dwindling resources and absentee boyfriend and relatives and grand-children. So, exactly how in this situation do I/we go over to the other side of the road, bend down, and offer a helping hand?

Caring, and the provocative implications of the parable of the Good Samaritan

Jesus tells the parable in response to the talented young lawyer's question, exactly "who is my neighbor?" The lawyer has already accurately explained how one's responsibility is to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind, and your neighbor as yourself." "That's right," Jesus says, "just do that and you will live." But then the question from the lawyer, "who is my neighbor?" Then Jesus answers with a story.

But as we have described the parable so far the point is be kind, be caring, take risks, yes, it may be dangerous, but be compassionate.

I think we all know that the parable digs in a little deeper. The priest and Levite are recognizable to the early listeners as good and decent men, “highly esteemed Jewish religious figures” in the Jerusalem temple environment. Their refusal to help their own fellow Jew is shocking. Concerns for purity ought to pale in comparison to helping out, and if the man lying beside the road were actually dead, purity concerns are nothing compared to the need for a proper burial of the exposed body. But pass by they do.

Then along comes the Samaritan, and here is the punch of the story. To most Jewish listeners the Samaritan represents the complete “other.” There was this long and old antagonism between Jews and Samaritans, the origins of which were murky. They were ethnically distinguishable, probably related to the forced migration of foreign people into the Northern Kingdom after the 8th century BC conquest by the Assyrians. And though the Hebrew people and the Samaritans each claimed to worship Yahweh they had their own scriptures, temple and diverse practices. So religiously, culturally and ethnically there were these differences. So when the Samaritan is the one who does the right thing, draws in close, and tends to the travelers need, this comes as an affront to Jesus’ audience.

No, that’s not the way it is supposed to be. That goes against our long-held assumptions. The lawyer, when confronted by Jesus’ question, “now who do you say the neighbor is?” can only mutter “the one who showed mercy.” It’s the right answer but it’s hard to admit.

This is the fundamental scandal of the parable. To explore it more, in our own contemporary time, biblical scholar Amy-Jill Levine suggests “to hear this parable in contemporary terms, we should think of ourselves as the person in the ditch, and then 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.”

So, when we engage in this exercise, trying to fill in the blanks, I’m hoping that we all find our list pretty short, even non-existent. We must recognize that in the grand scope of things we are pretty small and God is pretty good. Our world and our perspectives are small compared to the vastness of the universe, the beauty and diversity and wonder of all God’s many peoples.

When we peer into the mystery of the parable we begin to make out a faint outline. It’s just enough to go on, even to build our lives around. This stranger over here, can be my brother. This discourage one, over there, may be my sister. This despised one, who I do find most disgusting, this is my brother. That one over there, who I want to ignore, may be by sister.

God help us all in this earthly sojourn of ours. Give us enough light, O Lord, to see across to the other side of the road. Give our feet strength to walk over. Keep our hearts open and our hands open and caring.

Amen.

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