



Sunday July 10, 2022
Luke 10:25-37 (Fifth Sunday after Pentecost)

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Tony Acompanado

Who do you most identify with in the Parable of the Good Samaritan? Because, finding yourself in the story is part of what makes parables so powerful. Some days we read the story through the eyes of the priest or maybe the Levite, and some days we feel like the Samaritan. And it's easy to miss the shocking nature of this parable if we start to think that this story only teaches us to imitate the Samaritan; when in reality the parable says so much more about God, our relationship to God, and the lengths to which God will go to reach out to us.

Ponder this for a moment – an Israeli Jewish man is robbed, and a good Palestinian Islamist saves his life. A liberal Democrat is robbed, and a good conservative Republican saves her life. A white supremacist is robbed, and a good black teenager saves his life. A border patrol agent is robbed, and a good immigrant refugee saves his life. A transgender woman is robbed, and a good anti-LGBTQ activist saves her life. An atheist is robbed, and a good Christian saves his life.

What exactly makes the Samaritan “good” anyway – especially when he’s never referred to as “good” in the story? It makes me wonder, were there bad Samaritans?

What if the Samaritan was “good” simply because he made the choice to come near the almost dead man in the ditch? To approach him. To decrease the distance between himself and the man clearly in need of help.

And what if the eternal life that Jesus speaks of is found in nearness, not distance? In proximity, not reluctance? In deciding to be closer, and not looking for ways to push away.

We spend a lot of time and energy throughout our lives detaching and disengaging. And while sometimes our decisions are completely justified – for our safety, our self-preservation, or our self-care. There are other times when our distance is decided by our determination not to change, our resistance to intimacy, or our rejection of anyone who might actually expose who we truly are. If the Levite and the priest came near, they would’ve had to face some difficult truths about themselves that I’d suspect they’d rather not admit – that they’ve spent a lifetime pretending, hoping, even ensuring don’t exist.

“Who is my neighbor?” Well, according to Jesus, it means a commitment to coming near. Your neighbor isn’t just the person living next door in a house you never have to enter, into which you might never be invited, to whom you never have to speak. Your neighbor is not the one who happens to be convenient for you to help. Your neighbors are not those you can keep in their place. Your neighbor isn’t the one who meets the qualifications of your friendship.

Your neighbor is someone who, without a doubt, is experiencing pain, struggles, challenges, and sorrow, and yet to whom you draw near. Your neighbor is someone who clearly has needs and you decide – I will help you. Your neighbor is someone who might even resist your help, but you insist on offering it anyway.

But this shouldn’t be such a stretch for us as followers of Christ. After all, God’s decision to become human is just such an act – a commitment to closeness – a desire to close the distance. In the end, the Good Samaritan comes near as one who knows the Kingdom is near. And the Kingdom of God comes near when we do the same.

Now don’t get me wrong, I’m not trying to minimize the real and painful differences that divide us – especially when those differences have harsh, real-world consequences. But the hatred between the Jews and the Samaritans in Jesus’s day weren’t imaginary either; they were most certainly real. The differences between them weren’t easily negotiated and each of them was fully convinced that the other was wrong. Does this sound familiar in any areas of your life?

What Jesus did when he deemed the Samaritan “good” was radical and risky; it stunned his Jewish listeners. He was asking them to dream of a different kind of kingdom. He was inviting them to consider the possibility that a person might add up to more than the sum of their political, racial, cultural, or economic identities. He was calling them to put aside the history they knew and the prejudice they held on to in order to leave room for divine and world-altering surprises.

Perhaps what we need to do is find ourselves, not in the priest, the Levite, or the Samaritan, but in the wounded man, dying on the road. Notice that he’s the only character in the story not defined by profession, social class, or religious belief. He has no identity at all, except naked and in need.

Maybe we have to occupy his place in the story first — maybe we have to become the broken one – grateful to anyone who will show us mercy, before we can feel the boundless compassion of the Good Samaritan.



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Why? Because all loyalties fall away on the broken road. All divisions of "us" and "them" disappear out of necessity. When you're lying broken and defeated in a ditch, what matters isn't whose help you'd prefer, whose way of practicing Christianity you like best, or whose politics you agree with. What matters is whether or not anyone will notice you and then stop to show you mercy before you die. If it hasn't happened yet — then you'd better believe that your encounter on that dark road will happen at some point in your life.

Someday, somehow, somewhere, it will. In a hospital room. At a graveside. After a marriage fails. When a treasured job is ripped away. After the storm, the betrayal, the injury, the diagnosis. Someday, somehow, somewhere – for all of us...it will happen.

And when it does, it won't be your doctrine that saves you. It won't be your prized associations that matter. All that will matter is how quickly you can swallow your pride and grab hold of that hand you hoped never to touch or agree to receive help from that enemy you fear or misunderstand.

"Who is my neighbor?" the lawyer asked. Your neighbor is the one who surprises you with compassion. Your neighbor is the one who turns your understandings upside down and shocks you with the unexpected face of God. Your neighbor is the one who graciously steps over the line separating "us" from "them," and teaches you the real meaning of "good."

Jesus asks, "Who was this man's neighbor?" but there's also an underlying question that Jesus is asking... "Do you see your neighbor?" "Do . . . you . . . see . . . your neighbor?" It's one thing to acknowledge that you are neighbors to everyone else. It's something entirely different to "see" your neighbor. And the truth is, you can't actually be a neighbor unless you first see your neighbor.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said:

*"The ultimate measure of a man
is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience,
but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.
The true neighbor will risk his position, his prestige, and even his life
for the welfare of others.
In dangerous valleys and hazardous pathways,
he will lift some bruised and beaten brother
to a higher and more noble life."*

Through the image of the Samaritan, Jesus lifts up a surprising rescuer as an image of the God who relentlessly cares for those in need. Could it be that we're meant to identify not with the Samaritan or even the lawyer to whom Jesus speaks the parable, but rather with the man who is hopeless and left for dead? Could it be that Jesus is the good Samaritan who embraces us with the tender compassion of God?

All of the sudden the parable is turned upside down. Jesus isn't just giving us a comfortable story about morals reminding us to be nice, helpful, and generous people. Instead, Jesus is proclaiming the good news of the kingdom. God's grace comes to us through the cross. God's grace comes to us even and especially when we're at our worst, when we struggle in the depths and cry out for help. Even when we cannot or will not cry out – mercy and grace come into our lives through Jesus. So, whether you're on the road or in the ditch, Jesus is coming for you.

Dear friends, unless you see your neighbor, you can't be a neighbor. And "seeing" your neighbor, means loving that person as much as you love yourself.

In today's parable, the Samaritan saw his neighbor and he loved him – despite their differences. The Parable of the Good Samaritan catches us off guard and implicates us at the same time. When Jesus says, "Go and do likewise" to the lawyer – and to us – he means "Go and do likewise" for everyone – love everyone; accept everyone; welcome everyone – without any limitations. And just as Jesus opened his arms to the whole world; Jesus is telling you and I to go and do likewise. Thanks be to God. Amen.