



“Won’t You Be Their Neighbor?”

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
5:30 p.m., Sunday, July 9, 2016
The Reverend John H. Brock
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church
Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

Psalm 25:1-10; Luke 10:25-37

Grace to you and peace, from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

I had mentioned a couple of weeks ago that we would be getting this reading, and here it is: the story of the Good Samaritan. This is one of those few Bible stories that almost all of us know, if not by heart, then we at least know the overall theme of the story, which is to help those in need. But how well do we truly know this story?

The setup for our reading tonight goes back to the beginning of chapter 9:

“Jesus had his face set toward Jerusalem.”

We have to remember that, because it is **the** underlying factor in EVERYTHING that Jesus and does from Chapter 9 all the way until he enters Jerusalem, in Chapter 21, to a joyous tumult. Because, again, remember, Jesus knows he is *going to Jerusalem to die*.

In our reading for today, he’s asked a question. We’re told specifically that the questioner is a lawyer, and that the question is being asked in order to test Jesus. So it could be that this fellow is trying to trip Jesus up. Or, it could be that he is following the good Jewish tradition of making certain that those who are teaching know what they’re talking about. We don’t know, because scripture doesn’t tell us. All we know is that Jesus is being tested. And it’s a pretty basic question, one that I think we all want to know: what must we do to inherit eternal life?

Jesus responds in good rabbinic tradition (so, as far as I can tell, right away, he begins to score positive points). Jesus responds to a question with a question: “What is written in the law?” The guy’s a lawyer, right? This should be a “gimme.” And it is:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” (Luke 10:27 NRSV)

Okay, so both sides are responding correctly, and Jesus even compliments the fellow. Ah, but then, he’s a lawyer, he’s got to push the situation (nothing against lawyers):

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29 NRSV)

Was this a setup? A plant? Or did this fellow just push Jesus a bit too far? We don’t know. All we know for certain is that Jesus responds with “The Story”:

A Faithful guy goes on a trip from Jerusalem south toward Jericho. Hearers would know that this is not always the safest of places to travel, but our traveler does so anyway. This is kind of like someone taking 581 eastbound into Harrisburg on a weekday morning, thinking it's the fast way to downtown. It *might* be, but it may also *not* be. For our unnamed traveler, things turn out more the "not" way. He's mugged, beaten, and left for dead.

And that's an important part here, that "half dead" part. Because there are rules about who, and how, a faithful, observant person of faith would approach a *corpse* rather than someone who was simply *beaten* or *wounded*. And, the higher up the leadership ladder you are, the more responsibilities you have, and the less likely you would be on taking a chance where you might mess up your ability to carry out those religious responsibilities.

So when, first a priest, and then a Levite, spot this body in the ditch, they have to consider those responsibilities, and what it would take to get themselves back into the state of being able to perform those responsibilities.

Now, I can get as high and mighty as I want to, thinking, well, *I* would never do anything like keep walking; yet, then I have to think about how many times have I seen someone on the side of 15 Northbound who was attempting to change a tire, or had some type of car problems, and driven past them because I've had to get to Trinity to lead worship?

Another thing we need to consider here, too, is the simple fact that this body in a ditch may well have simply been a *trap*. When I lived in South Dakota, a friend of mine warned me to not go driving on any of the American Indian reservations, especially at night. I don't know that any of you are necessarily aware, but South Dakota has a rather high geographic area of reservations for Native Americans. There are only nine, but they take up around 17,000 square miles. To put that in perspective for us, that's an area about **three times** larger than Adams, York, Franklin, Cumberland, Dauphin, Lebanon, and Lancaster counties combined.

Most of the reservations are fairly well marked, like Pine Ridge, Rosebud, or Standing Rock. But a couple of them, Flandreau and Lake Traverse, to be exact, more or less blend in with the surrounding area. You really wouldn't know you were on a reservation, until you see the housing that the Native Americans have, as compared to the housing of those of European descent live in (and I don't mean tepees).

Anyway, my friend Lennie, born and raised in South Dakota, warned me about driving on reservation roads: "You'll see a guy on the side of the road, and a few other people standing around like he's hurt, and if you stop to help, they'll jump you." It was interesting to me to hear him say that, because it was almost exactly like what I had been warned about back home in Illinois about the South Side of Chicago, and then again when I would go to North Carolina visiting my relatives. Except in both of those two instances, I wasn't being warned about American Indians, I was being warned about African Americans.

(And while any of those scenarios are possible, my experience is that those warnings are based more on fear than fact).

So here's this Jewish guy, beaten to a pulp, laying in a ditch along the side of the road. He's been ignored, for right or for wrong, by two religious leaders. We don't know their motives. We aren't told what they're thinking, all we know about them is their occupation, and their actions. We can attempt to assign reasons to their actions, but that would only be speculation. Whether it was for religious law reasons, or they simply couldn't handle the concept of touching a dead body, or they feared it was a trap, for whatever reason, these first two people walk by.

Who is that stops to help, but the *Iraqi immigrant*, I mean, the *illegal Mexican*, no wait, sorry, I mean, the *Samaritan*. But, thing is, like an Iraqi immigrant or an illegal Mexican, that's how that Samaritan would have been viewed at that time. Samaritans were **not** viewed in any way in a positive light by Israelites. Samaritans were seen as half-breeds, worse than infidels, in part because they claimed to worship YHWH, yet did so, not at the temple in Jerusalem, but in Bethel. Samaritans were descendants of the ten tribes that were absorbed by the Assyrians, when the northern kingdom fell in 789BC. They were assimilated, and gone.

And to a "true" Israelite, *Samaritans* were the ones whom you crossed the street in order not to walk near. It was *Samaritans* who were always up to no good, who were shiftless, lazy, drunkards. So the *thought* of a *Samaritan* actually helping **anyone**, let alone an Israelite, is practically unthinkable.

But **this** guy does. Help, that is. An Israelite. And to bring this up to date, to attempt to make this as understandable as to how it would have been heard to that first century crowd, with as modern of an analogy as I can think of, especially in light of events of this week, for this Samaritan to assist, and then pay for, an injured, beaten, Israelite, would be like if an off-duty, in uniform, police officer got jumped, mugged, and left for dead; then both an influential politician and a well-known religious leader pass him by; it's the dark skinned guy wearing a "Black Lives Matter" tee-shirt who stops and helps the cop.

That's how radical this example of Jesus' is to his audience, and to the lawyer asking the question. This answer pretty much shuts down the lawyer. Because, did you notice, when Jesus asks his follow up question, the lawyer can't even bring himself to say the name "Samaritan." When Jesus asks him which of these examples were a neighbor to the beaten man, the lawyer answers:

"The one who showed mercy."

So the question becomes, then, who is our neighbor. Who is our neighbor, today? Who is our neighbor, in the light of the events of this past week? Are Muslims our neighbors? Are immigrants from anywhere - Iraq, Ecuador, Bangladesh, Mexico - are they are neighbors? Were Japanese Americans our neighbors in the 1940's? Or German Americans? What about Irish Immigrants in the 1870's? Have American Indians ever, really, been our neighbors?

How many of us, here tonight, need to be concerned for our lives when we are apparently complying with the directives given us by authorities? What about when we go to a movie theater, or are simply peacefully protesting? How do we help neighbors who do have to be concerned about how they are perceived while complying?

Unfortunately, I don't have answers. I wish I did. The only answer I **do** have, is to remind us that, to someone, somewhere, you, I, **all** of us, are Samaritans. All of us are looked down upon by someone. How do we want to be treated? How do **I** want to be treated? And isn't that, then, how we should treat one another?

Amen.

Copyright © 2016, John H. Brock. All rights reserved.



www.trinitycamphill.org