

When an Enemy Saves the Day

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Luke 10:25-37 — Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” He answered, “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.” And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.” But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

Good morning. I am so happy and humbled to be here with you. The very first thing I want to say to you all this morning is “thank you.” Although I don’t know you all very well just yet, one thing I do know about you, about this congregation, is that you are an extravagantly welcoming community. You know, we have these phrases like “sink or swim” and “being thrown into the deep end”; I don’t feel that way at all so far. The members of this church have been extraordinarily thoughtful and helpful as I’ve begun to get my feet wet in this church. You all have shown me around, offered valuable insight, gone out of your way to help me feel welcome. And I’m especially mindful of how many of you have given time, energy, and resources to preparing the manse for my partner Robert and I to live in, so that we can truly become a part of the community that I now serve. So for all of this and more, I am inexpressibly grateful — to the pastoral search committee, Deb, Jane, and Pat; to the members of Session; to Pastor Terry; to all of the leaders and administrators of the church; to all of you: thank you.

This morning, we are beginning a journey together. It's exciting for me, and I hope that it's exciting for you too. On my end, I'm excited for a host of reasons. I'm excited to step into this pulpit each Sunday and to explore Scripture with you, as we seek to receive a word from God for that morning and for the upcoming week; I'm excited to offer myself as a pastoral presence in your lives, whatever victories or defeats come your way, whatever desires or fears surface in your minds and hearts. I'm excited to listen to you, learn from you, and imagine with you new possibilities for this community and our ministries down the road; I'm excited about all of this and more, and I feel free to be excited because I trust God's work here. I trust that God is guiding all of us on this journey together.

Now having said all that about my excitement, I should say that beginning this journey is also a little scary for me -- and in fact I hope that it is a little scary for you too. The main reason why it's scary, I think, is that none of us knows what all the journey will hold. We certainly have ideas, hopes,

expectations, concerns. We want this journey to go in certain ways, but we also know that, well, we don't really know how it will go. We get to discover that together. We're all jumping into the deep end together. So, with God as our guide, here we go.

I expect that you've heard this morning's gospel reading before. Or at least you've heard the phrase "the parable of the Good Samaritan" before. It's one of the more well-known stories in the Bible, I'd imagine. For the last year or two, this story has reminded me of a personal experience in which I came closer than ever been before or ever since to being like the traveler in this parable. About two years ago, I was visiting a friend of mine in Chicago. This friend lived in a part of Chicago that I'd never been to before, and I had to ride a local train line that I don't remember riding before. I got off at a stop that I thought was the right stop, but once I got off the train and checked Google Maps on my iPhone, I realized that I was still two miles away from my destination. No matter, I thought. I can walk that distance. So, off I go, with my phone out in my hand, ready to direct me every step of the two miles. A small suitcase is in my other hand, and my book-bag, with my laptop inside, is slung across my shoulder. I walk maybe 20 yards. The next thing I remember, I am flat on my back on the concrete sidewalk, my head all throbbing and fuzzy. I hear a man's voice yelling "Stop! Stop!", and I turn my head over to see, very vaguely, off in the distance, a human figure running away. The man who had yelled came over to me, helped me up, walked me ten yards or so to his open garage, which appeared to be a welding shop, sat me down in a chair, and brought me a bottle of water. I saw that though I no longer had my phone, I still had my suitcase, book-bag, and wallet in my back pocket. I asked the stranger where I was, and he said "Chicago," and I thought to myself, "That's funny — I live in New Jersey; what am I doing in Chicago?" Thankfully, within a few minutes, I remembered why I was where I was and where I wanted to go. By that time, a police officer had arrived, and he eventually drove me the two miles to meet my friend. He told me, "You shouldn't have been walking around here." And at least three times, he said, "I'm just glad you weren't shot."

Now, all things considered, I fared pretty well after being mugged. Not only was I not shot, but I had no lasting injuries, I still had all of my possessions except one, I had people helping me right away, and I still had access to all sorts of resources — my wallet, my laptop, not to mention an urban area, where there's public transportation and pay phones and everything else that money can buy. It was a scary situation, to be sure, but I wasn't really in danger or at risk for more than a few minutes. The traveler from Jerusalem in our gospel reading, on the other hand, has a very different story. The road on which he's traveling, in between Jerusalem and Jericho, is a road across a desert. 15 miles or so. He doesn't have a car to travel by. No cell phone or any other modern technologies. No convenience stores along the way. No resources except what he is carrying with him. And now that he's been robbed and beaten, he has no money, no clothes, no water, no shade, no strength, and almost no hope. The text suggests that he might be unconscious, but if he is conscious, I'm sure that he feels overwhelmed by pain and fear.

In churches today, I think that we are very used to treating the stories of Jesus as feel-good stories, as sweet little parables that are meant to make us feel good. But this is not that kind of story; for two reasons. First, it starts out with, well, the ancient equivalent of shooting someone and leaving them for dead. This story's beginning would have naturally aroused fear in its original hearers, who would have known first-hand the perils of traveling alone in ancient times. And although we today, in this part of the world, don't face those same perils, at least not to the same extreme, this violent beginning can still arouse fear in us today, because we have our own stories like this one. We've heard them this week.

Stories of awful shootings, fueled by fear, always fueled by fear, and always fueling more fear. Whether ancient or current, stories of violence are, tragically, familiar to us. This is not the stuff of a feel-good story.

But there's another reason, a more profound reason, why Jesus isn't telling a sweet little parable to this lawyer — or to us this morning. And this reason isn't immediately apparent. Because unless you live a very different life from me, you probably haven't come across any Samaritans recently. There probably aren't any Samaritans in your part of town. So, who are these people? What did Jesus' original audience know about them that we don't know? Or, perhaps more importantly, what *feelings* did Jesus' original audience have towards these people that we don't have today? To sum it up, the Samaritans were a group of people who the Jews of Jesus' day despised. Samaritans claimed to be the rightful inheritors of ancient Israelite faith, and they worshiped at their own temple, on their own mountain, 30 miles or so north of Jerusalem. By the time of Jesus, the Jews and the Samaritans had been constant enemies for several hundred years. They had desecrated each others' temples and murdered each others' pilgrims. Typically, Jews wouldn't step foot in Samaritan territory, and they would have to go far out of their way to avoid it. Samaria was in between Judea, where Jerusalem is, and Galilee, which is also Jewish territory, so for those Jews who traveled between the two, if they didn't want to go through Samaria, they had to go all the way through the desert — the same desert where our traveler gets attacked — to the Jordan River, climb up the Jordan River, and then move west into Galilee. So, Jews made no attempts to hide their hatred and fear of the Samaritans.

This makes it all the more interesting that in our churches today, we refer to this story as “the parable of the good Samaritan.” That title isn't in our text itself, Jesus' original audience wouldn't have heard it, but if they had — the title itself would have been offensive. *What do you mean, “GOOD Samaritan”?* *There's no such thing.*

In the story that Jesus tells the lawyer, an enemy, a villain, saves the day. And the two people who the lawyer would expect to be the hero — the priest and the Levite, good upstanding people, religiously devout and even religious leaders — these people aren't a part of the happy ending.

So, if we were to try to put ourselves in the position of the lawyer, and the position of the original audience of this text, imagine with me a person who you greatly admire, who many people in society greatly admire. What profession, or what title, or what category of person has earned your respect and esteem? That's the person who passes by the helpless traveler. And now imagine with me a person, a category of person, who is, in your mind, more likely to be a villain than a hero. What kind of person, in your mind, is pretty much incapable of being “the good guy”? That's the person who saves the day in our story.

When the lawyer asks Jesus “Who is my neighbor?”, he wants an easy definition, he wants limits, he wants to know where his love can stop. The people who are close to him — his family, his friends, his neighborly acquaintances, those who are clearly within his circle of life and circle of thought — he knows he must love these people, and really that's just fine, for they are relatively easy to love; it's the people who are farther away — geographically and otherwise — that have this lawyer concerned, that lead him to ask Jesus how far his love must go.

It seems that the lawyer gets more than he bargained for. Jesus' answer to his question goes something like this: your neighbor — which is someone to whom you are expected to show goodwill — your neighbor is not the person who lives within a certain number of yards or miles of you; your neighbor is not the person who shares your background, your social values, your skin color, or your creed; your neighbor is simply the person who needs help. A person is a good neighbor when they offer and provide help to someone who needs it. And even if it's your enemy, or someone you think is your enemy, who needs help, you are called — we are all called — to be good neighbors to them.

That's disturbing enough, but Jesus doesn't stop there. In this story, he's not only encouraging us to be good neighbors to our enemies; he's also encouraging us to let our enemies be good neighbors to us. And the parable teaches us that even our worst enemies, even those people who we think of as utterly villainous, are capable of being a good neighbor.

This second piece, I think, is much easier for us to miss. We're used to hearing this story and thinking, "Okay, now I've got to be a good neighbor. I've got to be a good Samaritan." But what if God is inviting us also to be a good wounded traveler. What if God wants to open our hearts and minds to the ways in which the people we dislike, distrust, and fear, the people we think are bad or wrong or less worthy than ourselves, what if God wants to show us how *those* people are good neighbors and how they can be good neighbors for *us*.

That is a very hard task. One that we can only hope to achieve through the power, the wisdom, and the love of God at work in us. May the Spirit give us the desire and the courage to receive this work of God in our own lives today. Amen.