

“More Than a Good Deed”
Luke 10:25-37
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First Presbyterian Church of Spruce Pine

This morning we continue our journey through the Gospel of Luke, turning to a familiar passage in chapter 10 known as “The Good Samaritan.” To be honest with you, when I saw that the Narrative Lectionary had chosen this one for this the first Sunday of Lent, I did not want to preach on it. I was thinking, “This is too familiar of a passage! How can I say anything new about it?? Won’t people think they already know the moral of the story, so why even bother?!” But soon I was reminded of something I learned in seminary years ago, that there’s something good about preachers not always picking their own passages - that God’s Word should not be limited to our preferences or initial impressions, so this week I just stuck with it. And I learned a lot! As I shared in my email on Friday, the word “good” appears nowhere in the text to describe the Samaritan. And if an adjective was to be selected “merciful” or “compassionate” would be better choices. Sometimes we think we know things better than we do, so I invite you to join me in reading the passage, as if for the first time.

Luke 10:25-37 *Common English Bible*

A legal expert stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher, what must I do to gain eternal life?” Jesus replied, “What is written in the Law? How do you interpret it?” He responded, “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus said to him, “You have answered correctly. Do this and you will live.”

But the legal expert wanted to prove that he was right, so he said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus replied,

A man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. He encountered thieves, who stripped him naked, beat him up, and left him near death. Now it just so happened that a priest was also going down the same road. When he saw the injured man, he crossed over to the other side of the road and went on his way. Likewise, a Levite came by that spot, saw the injured man, and crossed over to the other side of the road and went on his way. A Samaritan, who was on a journey, came to where the man was. But when he saw him, he was moved with compassion. The Samaritan went to him and bandaged his wounds, tending them with oil and wine. Then he placed the wounded man on his own donkey,

took him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day, he took two full days' worth of wages and gave them to the innkeeper. He said, "Take care of him, and when I return, I will pay you back for any additional costs."

What do you think? Which one of these three was a neighbor to the man who encountered thieves?"

Then the legal expert said, "The one who demonstrated mercy toward him."

Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

When I began to study for the ministry at Union and then Columbia Theological Seminary, I felt like I was a fish out of water. I had not grown up Presbyterian, unlike many of my classmates who were Presbyterian since birth. I was not familiar with the Presbyterian process for ordination, and sometimes I felt like I was at a disadvantage. Being baptized as an infant into the Greek Orthodox Church but not being active in the parish that was an hour away from where I lived, I eventually landed in a Baptist youth group where I found a home with some of my school friends. But in seminary I learned that this played to my advantage when it came to knowing the Bible! When it came to studying for the Bible Content exam, my Baptist heritage gave me a boost. I had memorized more scripture than my Presbyterian peers, and so I had a better sense of which stories belonged to which book of the Bible. I already knew that the Gospel of Luke contained parables like the one we have just read - stories that are unique to Luke. *So as a good Presbyterian who has a strong Baptist background, I believe if we are going to understand today's story, we need to put it in the context of what is going on throughout Luke's Gospel.*

To begin with, one of the themes we see throughout Luke is referred to as "The Great Reversal." Throughout Luke's Gospel those who are downtrodden - the meek and the poor, those who are normally dismissed like the lowly shepherds at Bethlehem who first receive the good news of Jesus' birth, they are the ones who are lifted up! In Jesus' birth (outside in a feeding trough with the animals!) the coming of God's reign breaks into our world, and as Mary sings in her song of praise, God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, lifted up the lowly, filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty (1.46-53). The Great Reversal! Only in Luke's Gospel does Jesus begin his ministry announcing good news to the poor, release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind. And though many within Israel initially spoke well of him and celebrated his powerful words (4.16-22), Jesus soon meets some serious resistance. You see, time and time again Jesus reminds the good religious

people that God's love knows no boundary, and that as good Jews they should already know this! For example, in chapter 4 Jesus reminded the people in his hometown of Nazareth that the great Hebrew prophet Elijah went out of his way to a foreign widow in Sidon and gave her food. And instead of healing those in Israel, the prophet Elisha only cleansed Naaman the Syrian (4.25-27) of his skin disease. And as we saw in chapter 7, Jesus healed a Roman centurion's slave and marveled at his faith. And when Jesus comes across a funeral procession for a widow's only son who has died, Jesus does something remarkable. Luke tells us, "When the Lord saw her, he was moved by compassion" and comforts her. Jesus even breaks ritual codes and reaches out to touch the stretcher carrying the dead man, commanding him to rise up (7.13-14).

Now, I give you all of this background because what happens in the parable of the Samaritan is consistent with the message Luke is laying out for us. *What the Samaritan does in the parable is much more than a good deed.* Unlike the religious leaders (the priest and the Levite) who see the injured man and choose to walk on the other side of the road, leaving the injured one behind, the Samaritan does something remarkable. He sees the naked man who has been beaten up and he is moved with compassion. The word used for compassion is the same one describing Jesus' reaction to the widow who was burying her only son - the compassion that led Jesus to raise him back to life. The same word will be used in the Parable of the Prodigal son, when the Father is moved with compassion on seeing his lost son returning (15.20). This type of compassion is one that comes literally from your gut, a deep feeling that moves one to loving action and concrete care. This type of compassion-in-action is much more than just doing a good deed - it's an expression of God's love and mercy shared with those who are most vulnerable in the world. It's the kind of love that moves someone to take the risky action of attending to someone naked and left for dead on the side of a dangerous road. And what makes this parable even more radical is that the one who shows mercy is not the person you would suspect - not one of the religious leaders but someone who was an enemy to the Jews who worshiped in Jerusalem. There was no love loss between the Samaritans and the Jews. A rivalry existed between the Samaritans who worshiped on Mt. Gerizim and the Jews who worshipped in Jerusalem on Mt. Zion. They had deep-held religious and cultural differences that got passed down from generation to generation, and for Jesus to tell a story where the Samaritan is the hero is the kind of thing that eventually will lead to Jesus' death. *Throughout Luke's Gospel Jesus consistently preaches and models a boundary breaking love that is too much for the religious establishment to handle.*

In his words and in his deeds, Jesus continues to send one message: God's love and compassion is for all people, even the neighbors we consider our enemies. When the lawyer comes to Jesus and asks him a question about how to inherit eternal life, he is

doing this to test Jesus. He's testing Jesus just like the devil put him to the test with various temptations, so the lawyer is acting as an adversary, as an enemy. But I love how Jesus responds to him - he welcomes the question and invites the man to share what he knows about the Jewish law. The answer he gives is correct ('Love God and love neighbor') and Jesus responds positively: "You have answered correctly. Do this and you will live." But Jesus never misses a teaching moment. When the lawyer wants to justify himself, he asks Jesus another question, "Who is my neighbor??" But when Jesus responds by telling the parable, do you realize that Jesus actually never answers the question? While the lawyer wants to know which person he is required to love - which person qualifies to be a neighbor or not - Jesus ends with the question, "Which of the three was being a neighbor to the man on the side of the road?" And he ends by encouraging the lawyer to go and do likewise, to extend the same boundary-breaking love in his life. *But the ending is left open - we aren't told how the man will respond, and the same is true for us. I believe Jesus invites us to extend the neighborly love of God in our lives. Will we?*

In closing I want to share a true story that a friend of mine recently shared with me, a modern day version of a compassionate Samaritan - a story that hopefully will invite us to lean into the love and compassion that is so desperately needed in today's world (Dr. Rev. Lea Brown's sermon "Common Hope, Common Values: Equality" September 6, 2009)

This story takes place in the most unlikely of locations, a Nordstrom Department store. It is about a woman who was an associate pastor of a large Presbyterian Church in Southern California. She loved to go to Nordstroms, mostly for the ambiance and the beautiful things they had there, because like many people she couldn't really afford to actually buy anything there.

On one of her visits, the minister was on the top floor of the store looking at some of the most beautiful dresses to be found anywhere, when the elevator doors opened and out stepped a very disheveled looking woman. Her clothes were dirty and torn, her hair was matted, her stockings were rolled down to her ankles. She was muttering to herself and it was clear by the immediate reaction of those around her that she didn't smell very good. She stood there holding a very full and very dirty gym bag in her hand, and it was obvious that she probably wasn't going to buy anything—all the dresses were in the multi thousand-dollar range. The minister half-expected a security guard to come and show the woman out. But instead of a security guard, a stately saleswoman came over to the woman with the gym bag and asked, "May I help you, madam?" The woman said, "Yeah! I wanna buy a dress!" "Any particular kind of dress?" the saleswoman asked in a very kind and dignified manner. "A party dress!" the woman answered. "Well, you've come to the right place," said the saleswoman.

"Follow me. I think we have some of the finest party dresses in the world." The saleswoman then spent more than fifteen minutes matching the dresses with the woman's skin color and eye color, trying to help her find just the right match. After selecting three dresses, the saleswoman said, "Shall we go and try them on?" They headed into the dressing room. The minister hurried into the adjoining dressing room and put her ear up to the wall. She had to hear what would happen next. The woman with the gym bag tried on the dresses with the saleswoman's help. But then, after about another 15 minutes, the woman said very abruptly, "I've changed my mind. I'm not going to buy a dress today!"

The minister in the adjoining cubicle held her breath and heard the saleswoman say, "That's all right." And then, in a gentle voice she said, "But here's my card. Should you come back to Nordstrom, I do hope that you'll ask for me. I would consider it such a privilege to wait on you again."

When I heard this story I thought about Jesus' parable. This saleswoman's day was interrupted because of this troubled woman. She took the time out of whatever she was doing to honor the humanity of someone who had probably already been rejected by many people that day. She spent 15 minutes helping this person try on dresses in a small room, which I'm sure wasn't a pleasant experience given this woman's lack of access to facilities that would enable her to take care of her personal hygiene. For all she knew her personal safety may have been at risk, being in such close proximity to someone who clearly suffered from a serious mental illness. I don't know if Nordstrom employees work on commission or not, but if they did, I wonder how much the saleswoman lost in commissions while she was waiting on someone who she must have known would never be able to buy a dress at Nordstrom. But none of that mattered. What did matter to this saleswoman were the choices she made from moment to moment that day. What mattered to her was that she chose to treat the woman with the gym bag with great respect and compassion – as if her life truly mattered as much as anyone else in the store that day (Dr. Rev. Lea Brown's sermon "Common Hope, Common Values: Equality" September 6, 2009).

Commenting on this passage, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, *"Both of the religious leaders in the parable asked the question: 'If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?' But the Samaritan turned this question around and asked instead: 'If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?'"*

My friends, the Gospel invites us to center our hearts and our lives not just on ourselves but on the neighbors God puts right in front of us. May we find the courage and compassion to share the boundary-breaking love of God in the lives we are living. Amen.

