



“Meeting the Good Samaritan”

Luke 10:25-37

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The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

About noon on January 2, 2007, Wesley Autry and his two school age daughters were standing on the subway platform at 137th St. and Broadway. Nearby a man collapsed and fell onto the subway tracks as the lights of the approaching train appeared. Autry leaped down to help the man. He tried to lift him up but there was not enough time. The train was too close. Autry rolled the man between the tracks and lay on top of him as the train passed over them both with only inches to spare.

Autry was celebrated as a genuine American hero. Mayor Bloomberg awarded him the Bronze Medallion, the highest New York City award for exceptional citizenship. President Bush invited him to the State of the Union Address as his special guest. The president commended Autry for his courage and the First Lady embraced the new hero.

Autry was called the “Hero of Harlem” and the “Subway Superman.” *Newsday* named Autry “The Subway Good Samaritan.”

Like many of you, I’ve stood on subway platforms, looked down at the tracks and wondered how Wesley Autry summoned the courage to leap in front a rushing train to save a stranger lying on the subway tracks. Would I be a Good Samaritan under the same circumstances?

The name “Good Samaritan” comes from a story Jesus told. It is, perhaps, the best-known story in the bible. We name awards for the Good Samaritan. Many hospitals bear the name Good Samaritan. Churches name themselves Good Samaritan and most Christians want to be Good Samaritans. The term has come to mean doing good or helping others in need.

Is that what Jesus really meant when he told the story of the Good Samaritan? Perhaps we need to take another, closer look. This is a parable and parables bear weight, they tease our minds and are intended to transform us. There may be more to the story than we’ve come to believe.

Things seemed to be going well. The Kingdom of God announced by Jesus was taking hold in lives and a new community was being formed. Jesus wanted to pass the torch to his disciples and sent seventy of them out into the villages to announce the good news of God’s growing reign on earth and to invite people to join the new movement.

The seventy experienced great success. The power of God was with them as with Jesus and many people accepted the invitation to become disciples of Jesus. When they reported back to Jesus, he was overjoyed. “Blessed are you [disciples]” he said, “you have seen things prophets and kings only hoped to experience. You unimportant ‘little

people' are the pioneers of God's new world." God was doing something radical and new, here and now.

About then, one of the important 'big' people of the day approached Jesus. He was a lawyer, an expert in Jewish law. He was also a theologian since there was no distinction between civil and religious law in Israel.

Suspicious of this populist movement, the lawyer/theologian wanted to test the young preacher and show him he was unqualified to make such radical claims for himself and his followers.

He asked Jesus a difficult theological question, a question often discussed by lawyers and theologians. He suspected Jesus hadn't done his homework, wouldn't be up on the scholarly debate, and would be publically embarrassed.

"How can I inherit eternal life?" he asked. Is it possible for the divine, eternity, to touch a human life? How can the quality of eternity invade our lives. How can we get in touch with God's world and God's will? Now that's a big question with some large and debated answers. It was meant to put Jesus on the defensive.

Jesus refused to take the bait. "You're an expert in these matters," Jesus said, "how do you read Scripture?"

The lawyer gave the correct answer, the current and correct wisdom of the rabbis. Jesus called it the Great Commandment: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind." That's the first part of the Great Commandment. It's a quote from Deuteronomy 6:4, a prayer offered twice a day by the pious. Then the lawyer/theologian added the second half of the Great Commandment, a quote from Leviticus 17, "and you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

"You are right," Jesus said, "Do this and you will live." That summary of the law of God is God's will and at the center of God's will for the world.

But the lawyer/theologian was not finished with Jesus. He tried another tactic. "Well then," he said, "who is my neighbor?"

The meaning of the word 'neighbor' was another big topic of debate among the religious teachers of the day. After all, they noted, the command to love your neighbor in Leviticus is in a section of the law that talks about how to treat fellow citizens. "Do not hate your kin," it reads. "Bear not a grudge against your people." Then it says, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Doesn't the use of 'kin' and 'your people' mean neighbor is restricted to family, tribe, nation and race? Egyptians and Syrians are neither our kin nor our people, must we love them?

Jesus answered that question with a question embedded in a story we call the Good Samaritan.

A certain man was on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. That simple sentence got Jesus' listener's attention. That road, the Jericho Road, is a dangerous seventeen-mile stretch of road that winds through the rugged Judean hills. Back then, the road was notorious for bands of robbers that preyed on travelers. It was not wise to travel the Jericho Road alone. This man was in for trouble.

Sure enough, he was attacked by a band of robbers, who beat him, robbed him and left him for dead by the side of the road. It's what you'd expect.

A priest happened to pass by. Priests were the religious aristocracy who ran the political system in Jerusalem. He saw the robbery victim in the ditch and, perhaps fearing an ambush, or because he was in a hurry, or because the law forbade a priest to touch a corpse, the priest passed by on the other side of the road. "Just what you'd expect from a

rich priest,” the hearers thought to themselves. This story is about corrupt leaders and the lawyer/theologian, who is one of them, is going to be embarrassed.

Then a Levite happened by. Levites were minor clergy, semi-aristocrats, who ran the Temple in Jerusalem. He, too, saw the wounded man and like the priest, passed by on the other side. “We’re not surprised,” Jesus’ listeners thought. “The clergy are corrupt and care nothing for common people.”

Jesus’ listeners, as was common in stories of the day, anticipated the next person to come along would be a common man like them and a good layman would be the hero of the story.

A third man happened by, a Samaritan. That was a stunning, unexpected, and outrageous turn in the story. The Samaritans were the sworn enemies of Israel. On the northern border of part of Israel, the Samaritans were a mixed race who’d invented a deviant form of religion. They’d refused to help Israel rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple after the Babylonians destroyed the Jewish nation. The Samaritans allied themselves with Syria in war against Israel. In return Israel destroyed Samaria’s Temple and defiled the holy place with human bones. No Samaritan would be caught dead on the Jericho Road. What a shocking turn of the story.

Most shocking still, the Samaritan saw the wounded man and, Jesus says, “was moved with pity.” He stopped, treated his wounds with oil and wine, put the victim on his animal, and took him to an Inn where he paid two days room rent and instructed the Innkeeper to look after the man until he returned in two days and, if necessary, he’d pay any more expenses incurred by the wounded man’s stay.

The sworn enemy did a heroic deed for his sworn enemy. It was disturbing then – and now. Remember the famous handshake between two sworn enemies, Yasser Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin, a number of years ago. The consequence was shock, anger, and violence in Israel and among the Palestinians. It was unthinkable.

“Now then,” Jesus said to the lawyer, “which of the three passersby was neighbor to the man in the ditch?”

“I suppose the one who helped him,” the lawyer answered. He couldn’t bear to say the name Samaritan.

“Go and do likewise,” Jesus said. There are no limits to the word neighbor and no exclusions to the command to love your neighbors – all of them.

Frankly the lawyer/theologian should have known better. Back in Leviticus 17 where it says to love your neighbor it says a few verses later, “The alien who resides among you shall be to you as a citizen. You shall love the alien as yourself. Remember, you were once aliens.”

The applications of the story to modern life are all around us. But remember, Jesus meant this story to be more than a morality tale – it is supposed to change us. And we all need changing don’t we?

Years ago, in what became a famous experiment, a seminary professor gave an assignment to a class: prepare a five minute talk on the parable of the Good Samaritan for recording and possible use on the campus radio station.

The day the assignment was due, the students met in the class and were told to make their way across campus to the recording studio. Meanwhile, the professor hired an actor to play the part of a man in deep physical distress alongside the sidewalk between the classroom and the recording studio. Not one student stopped to help the man in distress.

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One student reportedly stepped over the man in his hurry to give his talk on the Good Samaritan.

We need changing – all of us need larger hearts filled with the mercy that prompts heroic deeds. In fact, we are the wounded man in the ditch needing healing. There is one who happens by, himself wounded, rejected and suffering. Jesus Christ, the Good Samaritan and our Savior, sees us, stops and takes us to the place of healing. He gives us new hearts.

Do you want to be more like the Good Samaritan? Contemplate our wounded healer. Experience the love and mercy of God revealed in Jesus Christ – supremely at the cross. The Experience will change us all.

Amen.

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