

WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?

The Parable of the Good Samaritan has to be one of Jesus' most well-known stories. I first heard about the Good Samaritan in Sunday School at a small Baptist church in a very small town outside of Chicago, Illinois, when I was about 6 years old. (Do not do the math! It was in 1956.) I heard the story at least once a year in church after that, at the First Baptist Church and then the First Presbyterian Church in Tallahassee, Florida. And I can't even count the number of times my mother told me this story.

Today, I sometimes wonder if people have heard the parable of the Good Samaritan so often that we have stopped really listening to it. When we hear "the Good Samaritan", do we just think: "A man needs help; some men don't help him; another man stops and helps; we should do the same thing."

Now, that is a pretty good story. Helping people who need it is a good thing. It sounds like something Jesus would want us to do. But, maybe we have stopped paying attention to some of the details in the story--a priest, a Levite, a Samaritan? I mean, how many of us today even know a Jewish priest, a Levite, or a Samaritan? Aren't these just unimportant parts of the story?

Well, Jesus isn't exactly known for his simple stories, is he? In fact, when the disciples once asked him why he spoke in parables, Jesus said, "The reason I speak to them in parables is that '...seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.'" So, if Jesus is the one telling a story, the details in the story probably mean something, something important.

Before we get into the details of priest, Levite, and Samaritan, let's look at why Jesus is telling this story in the first place. The first verses that Dave read this morning, verses 25 through 29 give us the background for this parable, and I will read them again:

25 Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus.^[a] "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" 26 He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" 27 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.”²⁸ And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”²⁹ But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

So, the story starts with a lawyer wanting to test Jesus. The lawyer already knows what he must do to inherit eternal life. He already knows that loving God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind and that loving your neighbor as yourself is the right answer.

But even though he already knows the answer, he is a lawyer. He doesn't want simple; he doesn't want clear. He's looking to find a loophole, an exception to the rule. He wants Jesus to say something that will allow the lawyer to tell himself that he is doing enough to inherit eternal life, that he is doing enough to keep God happy.

Now, let's get back to Jesus' parable. Let's look at some of those details that might be more important than we thought. So, the man who was robbed, beaten, and left for dead was Jewish; the Priest was Jewish; and the Levite was Jewish. If Jesus' parable had ended there, the lawyer probably would have been happy. He could have told himself that while the Priest and the Levite were not good neighbors, he would have helped the man; he would have been a good neighbor.

But Jesus' parable did not stop there. The person who helped the man in need was a Samaritan; the victim was Jewish. Now, without going into the history, we know that Samaritans and Jews generally despised each other. And this is the part of the story that was probably hard for the lawyer and is probably hard for us today.

Jesus sets a higher bar for us: We also need to be a neighbor to someone who is different from us, someone who is “other”, who is outside of our group.

An example of people meeting Jesus' higher bar happened in Louisville, Kentucky earlier this year. As we all know from the news, there have been many times in recent months when a policeman has shot and killed an unarmed person. It almost always seems like the policeman has been white, and the unarmed person has been black.



In March, police officers shot and killed a 26-year old African-American woman named Breonna Taylor. Breonna Taylor was an emergency medical technician who planned to become a nurse. One officer has been accused of “blindly” firing 10 rounds into Taylor’s apartment from an outdoor patio.

After her death, angry protests and demonstrations took place in the streets of Louisville. One night, responding to another policeman’s call for assistance, Officer Galen Hinshaw drove as close as he could to the scene. As he got out of his cruiser, he was immediately surrounded by protesters. Some yelled profanities. Others balled their fists. He was alone, his nearest help still blocks away. The crowd moved closer, and the yelling got angrier. The 32-year-old was scared. “Here we go,” he thought. “I’m preparing to be injured.”



It was at this moment that a man emerged from the crowd in a red University of Louisville mask covering the lower half of his face. He put himself between the closest protester and Hinshaw.

Ultimately, five men formed a human shield to protect Hinshaw. All of them strangers to one another. Nobody knew the name of the man to his left or to his right. Three were black, one white, one Dominican — all linking arms to keep harm away from Hinshaw.



As one of the men said, "A human was in trouble...Nobody knew anybody, but we just stood up and did that. If the officer was black, we would've done the same thing. He's somebody else's son. He's somebody else's loved one."



Hinshaw is looking forward to meeting them all and thanking them in person. Hinshaw continues to be moved by the moment. "It was a moment where strangers came together to help another stranger, and that stranger was me."

In the United States right now, every difference we have seems to divide us. Whoever is in my group is good; whoever is in your group is bad. My group is right; your group is wrong. My group is informed; your group is ignorant. My group is important; your group doesn't matter. People in my group are friends; people in your group are enemies. That is sad and it is not what God intended for us.

I think God created differences to make life interesting, to enrich our lives and to teach us things. What if all the birds in the world were robins? While robins are nice, isn't it wonderful that there are also eagles and

swans and hummingbirds and woodpeckers and swallows and hawks and owls and wrens and doves? The many different kinds of birds make life interesting and beautiful.

So, let's think about what Jesus' parable might mean for us today.

What if the man who had been beaten and robbed, lying helpless by the side of the road was a Muslim, or a Jew, or a Hindu? Would his religion make a difference to you? Would you stop to take care of him, or would you pass by on the other side?

What if the victim was not someone from the US but came from a different country? From Russia, China, Canada, or Cameroon? Would you stop to help each of them, or would you pass by on the other side?

What if the victim was a right-wing conservative Republican? Or a left-wing, liberal Democrat? Are both your neighbor or would you pass one by on the other side?

What if the person in need was Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton? Are both of them your neighbor or would you pass one by on the other side?

What if the person by the side of the road was lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender? Are they all your neighbor, or would you pass by on the other side?

The question of possible neighbors does not stop there; the list goes on. What about:

- A person in Cameroon who is Anglophone or Francophone? Are they both neighbors or would you pass one by?
- A person of another race—white, black, Hispanic, Asian? All neighbors or pass some by?
- A white supremacist? Neighbor or pass on by?
- An undocumented immigrant? Neighbor or pass on by?
- Someone who is poor or even homeless? Neighbor or pass on by?
- Someone who is in prison? Neighbor or pass on by?
- Someone who is divorced? Neighbor or pass on by?
- Someone who is an alcoholic, a drug addict, or just plain lazy? Are they neighbors who all “deserve” our help or do we pass some by?

Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan speaks to us today as much as it did to the lawyer who was testing him.

In some ways, it is not easy to follow the teachings of Jesus. Jesus often challenges us to move outside of our comfort zones and to think about things differently, to put aside our prejudices and our biases. To do things for people we don't like as well as for our friends. To think about others as well as ourselves. To see everyone as our neighbor. It is so much easier to pass by the person in need than to see them as your neighbor and stop to help them.

And Jesus knows us so well! He knows that sometimes he has to spell it out for us. So, in the parable of the Sheep and the Goats in Matthew 25 Jesus makes his teaching even clearer:

If someone is hungry, feed them.

If someone is thirsty, give them something to drink.

If someone is a stranger, invite them in, welcome them.

If someone is naked, give them some clothes.

If someone is sick, look after them.

If someone is in prison, visit them.

It is so easy to see people as different from ourselves. And when people are different, it becomes easier to judge them, to not help them, to not welcome them, and to pass them by.

As the Mission Study Task Force moves toward the completion of its work, I pray that we will feel God's call to follow the lead of the PC(USA) and the Presbytery of Boston to become a Matthew 25 church, formally and publicly committing Good Shepherd to act boldly and intentionally and compassionately to serve neighbors who are hungry, oppressed, imprisoned, or poor. Please look carefully at the description on page 2 of our bulletins; from the electronic version of the bulletin you can follow the links to each focus of Matthew 25: building congregational vitality, dismantling structural racism, and eradicating systemic poverty.

I hope and I pray that Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church will choose to fully become the welcoming place I have usually felt it to be, a church

where all are welcome regardless of religious background; where all are welcome regardless of country of origin; where all are welcome regardless of political opinion; where all are welcome regardless of sexual identity; where all are welcome regardless of race; where all are welcome regardless of class. Where ALL are welcome. Where every human being is our neighbor, and all are WELCOME. A church that fully lives out its current Mission Statement:

“Called by the love of God to form a Christian community, we therefore are committed to nurture relationships, to grow in faith and understanding, to proclaim God's Word, to care for God's world, and to invite others to celebrate life in joyful service to Jesus Christ.”