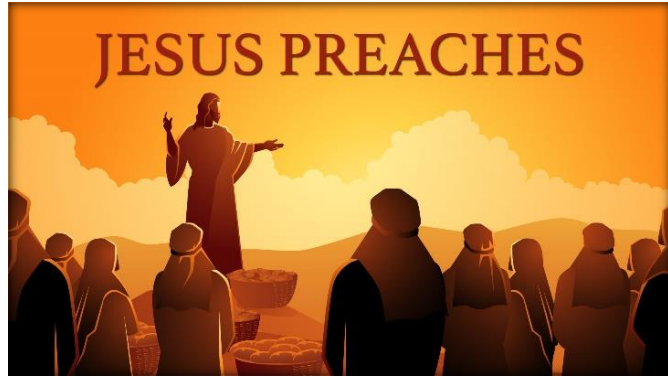


“Who Is Your Neighbor?”

*Deuteronomy 6:4-5; Leviticus 19:18;
Luke 10:25-37*

We know we are to love our neighbors. We even have the Golden Rule. But who is our neighbor? Who are we to love as we love ourselves? That is a much a harder question to answer.



The so-called Parable of the Good Samaritan is the best-known of all Jesus’ parables. People who don’t know anything about Jesus or the Bible know that being a Good Samaritan is about helping someone in trouble. We even have Good Samaritan laws that protect from blame those who help others who have been injured.

But a closer look at Jesus’ story reveals that it has a hard edge and challenging message that goes far beyond simply helping someone in trouble.

Being neighborly?

A casual, uninformed reading of the parable leads to an unarguable conclusion – if someone needs help, even someone you don’t know, step up and help them. This is absolutely in keeping with Jesus’ teaching and even our own consciences. But Jesus would hardly use a parable to convey such an obvious and uncontroversial point. No, there is much more going on in this story.

First, go back over the exchange between the lawyer and Jesus. The lawyer wants to know how to inherit eternal life. Jesus asks the man what is contained in the Law, and the lawyer responds as Jesus would – love God and love neighbor (see Matthew 22:34-39). But the lawyer won’t stop there. Trying to show everyone how righteous he is, the lawyer goes on to ask, “Who is my neighbor?” The very fact that he asks the question reveals that the man isn’t nearly as righteous as he thinks he is. He would know the answer if he really comprehended God’s Law. Further, the question is a trap. Social boundaries were central to Jewish society, as they struggled to maintain a distinct separate identity from the pagan world around them. Boundary markers, such as Sabbath observance and circumcision, were cherished and protected...to a fault. The lawyer asks a dangerous question, and Jesus knows that he has a dangerous answer, one that will offend and probably not even be understood, so Jesus answers the question with a vivid parable.

The parable begins with an unidentified man who is traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho, which lies a short distance to the northeast. Certainly, Jesus’ listeners would have assumed the man is Jewish and would have identified with him as he is beaten and left for dead. When Jesus tells of a priest that passes by and then a Levite (the tribe of priests), his listeners probably expected

that the third person, the hero, would be a regular Jew like them. Then, the story would become a standard anticlerical warning—“it’s always the preacher’s fault!”

But that isn’t what Jesus does at all. Instead, the hero of the story is a Samaritan! The shock here is lost on us unless we know that the Samaritans¹ were despised by the Jews. Not just disliked but hated. Jews allowed themselves no contact at all with Samaritans. When Jesus once asked a Samaritan woman for a drink, she was shocked, for a Jew would never do such a thing (see John 4 for the whole story).

Jesus’ listeners were probably not even sure they would have accepted help from a Samaritan. And then Jesus goes on to detail at length all the aid and compassion that the Samaritan provides, skillfully driving home that it is a Samaritan who not only helps but is the one who understands what God really means by “neighbor.”

This parable is part and parcel of Jesus’ going after the boundaries that the Jews had constructed around themselves. They clung so tightly to their cherished boundary markers that they were deaf to God’s call and had forgotten that all the families of the earth were to be blessed through them (Genesis 12:3). You can be sure there was a lot of talk, much of it agitated, after Jesus finished the story.

What’s a Parable?

Jesus often taught using parables. Indeed, more than two dozen such stories are recorded for us in the Gospels. Jesus obviously used such stories on many occasions as he sought to help people understand the kingdom of God, for that is subject of many of the parables.

A parable is a very short story with a double meaning; it is brief and metaphorical. On the surface, the parable might be about sowing or fishing, but on a deeper level, it points to something else and it challenges the hearer to discover that second meaning by thoughtful listening. C. H. Dodd gives us a classic definition that repays a close reading: “At its simplest, the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.” In other words, we need to let Jesus’ parables surprise us and make us think!

One caution . . . the nature of the parables makes it easy for us to let our imaginations run wild. Over the centuries, Christians have done exactly that. My advice is that you let the stories be stories, don’t push them too far, and try to hear the surprise! Let the stories subvert your normal way of thinking.

A telling retelling

But, of course, words like “priest,” “Levite,” and “Samaritan” don’t have any emotional weight with modern readers. Even knowing that the Jews despised Samaritans doesn’t get us

¹ Samaria was the geographic area between Galilee in the north and Judea in the south. The Jewish antipathy toward the Samaritans probably stemmed from the fact that they were seen as people who had once worshipped God but no longer did, at least not as the Law required.

emotionally involved. So, following John Dominic Crossan, let's "rephrase the story in contemporary dress."²

The storyteller becomes an American who has made his way to a Tel Aviv cafe from southern Israel, near Gaza. The story takes place just north of Ashkelon. The wounded person is a woman correspondent for ABC. Those who pass by without helping her are, first, a local rabbi and, second, an IDF soldier. Finally, she is rescued and cared for by a Hamas terrorist.

You can fill out the details yourself. What sort of reaction do you think this story would get from the listeners in the cafe?

If the story as retold here upsets, you or causes you to shout – "It could never happen that way!" – then you are getting in touch with Jesus' story. The parables are meant to shock and to subvert, to shake us up and *not* leave us unchanged.

This parable is not about "loving your neighbor." There couldn't be anything shocking or emotional in that. As Crossan puts it: "Do we really think that the storyteller would be able to convince an audience which was about to hang him that all he was trying to say was 'Love your neighbor'?"

Jesus builds the story around a Samaritan for a reason – to confront his listeners with the question of whether they really understand God's definition of "neighbor." In other words, it is Jesus saying, "Can you hear me now?" Can we?

Some final reflections

"Who is my neighbor?" Before we answer too quickly, consider that Jesus is really saying that every person is our neighbor and, hence, we are to love every person. Not in some sort of emotional or sentimental hug but in the nitty-gritty of day-to-day living – housing, food, and the rest. "Love" in the New Testament is not a sentiment, but action. As Paul repeatedly puts so many ways, "Want to know what love is? Look to the cross."

So, back to the "who." Even saying "everyone" is too impersonal. You might try redressing this parable yourself. How might Jesus have told this parable in Selma, Alabama in 1964? Or Northern Ireland in 1985? Or Baghdad in 2003? How about in Cocke County today?

What boundaries do we tend to draw? Even if we don't believe we exclude people from the list of "neighbor," many of us still tend to rank groups of people as to who gets our "best" love. A lot of honesty is needed here, probably more than we can share in a group. But this parable asks that we look deeply in the mirror and confront the many boundaries, of various types, that we erect around ourselves.

Jesus' parable is part and parcel of his teaching about loving our enemies. It is true, as he says, that anyone can love their friends and family. But loving our enemies? Who can really do that? Perhaps this becomes clearer if we consider that Jesus isn't asking us to deny our feelings, though he might be hoping they change. Rather, he is challenging us to act toward our enemy in ways that are grounded in love.

² The shocking nature of this parable is driven home in John Crossan's, *The Dark Interval*. 1988. Sonoma, CA: Polebridge

Interpreting Parables

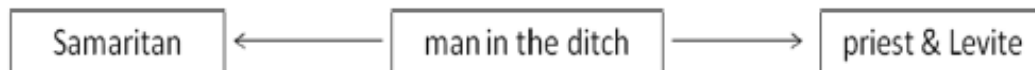
By their nature, parables lend themselves to over- and under-interpretation. For example, it is often said that each parable has a single main point. But this isn't necessarily so. Often, there are important meanings built around each main character. There are five questions to ask yourself about a parable that will help you hear Jesus better. In this text box, we'll step through these questions for each parable in this series.

What is the narrative context of the parable?

- A religion scholar has asked Jesus what he must do to attain eternal life. Jesus asks the man what he has read himself. The lawyer replies that one must love God and love neighbor. Jesus affirms the answer. Then, the scholar, perhaps setting a trap, asks Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?"
- The Good Samaritan parable is Jesus' reply to the scholar's second question.

What is the parable's structure?

- This is a pretty simple parable, with three main characters (the priest and the Levite function simply as two instances of a single narrative character).



What background information about culture, customs, geography and so on are important?

- There is one hugely important piece of context. The Jews despised the Samaritans. Here's an old rabbinic saying that illustrates this well: "One who eats bread baked by a Samaritan is like one who eats pork." For a Jew, eating pork is about as bad as it gets.

What is the perspective of each of the main characters?

- The half-dead man – It is one thing to love your enemy; isn't it another to be loved by your enemy? To put it another way, how difficult was it for the injured man to let himself be helped, to be loved, by this passing Samaritan? How often do we have trouble accepting help from our friends and family, much less someone we despise.
- The Samaritan – The question answered isn't really even "Who is my neighbor?" but "Who knows the right answer to Jesus' question?" The Samaritan knows; it is he who steps over all boundaries to provide care.
- The priest & Levite – What stops us from living lives built on compassion? What caused these men to pass by the injured man? Whose priorities really guides their lives – their own or God's? Whose priorities shape our own lives?

With whom in the story did the first hearers identify?

- Might they have identified with the injured man, wondering who, if anyone, would stop to help them. And then, it is a hated Samaritan. I imagine at least a few of Jesus' listeners' first reaction would be, "I'd rather die than accept help from a Samaritan!"

Note: The parable diagram is taken from Craig Blomberg's book, *Interpreting the Parables*. If you really want to dig into the parables, this book is a good guide.