

“Who is Our Neighbor?”

Sermon by Rev. Glenn A. Brumbaugh

Lent 2, Year C,

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Luke 10:25-37 NRSV

Who is our neighbor?

SLIDE

That's probably one of the biggest biblical questions Christians have wrestled with since the Gospel of Luke was written in the late first century of the last millennium.

Is it based on geography,

based only on those who live in our immediate vicinity

or our local community?

Is it limited to people who are like us?

Or believe the same as us, in other words, fellow Christians?

The story of the Good Samaritan is one that is familiar to most of us.

So much so, that the term “Good Samaritan”

has become part of our vernacular whether we know the story behind it or not.

This concept of selflessly assisting others in need

is actually protected in most places

by what we refer to as “Good Samaritan” laws.

These laws attempt to protect someone from legal liability

should they choose to try to assist someone

like the victim in our gospel lesson today.

SLIDE

Most of us have a sense that to help another in need is what we call “ethical” behavior, in other words, it's the right thing to do.

John Sommerville a history professor at the University of Florida

has been carrying out an exercise with his students for years.

He challenges his students with the following thought experiment.

Imagine that you see a little old lady coming down the street at night and she is carrying a great big purse.

It suddenly occurs to you that she very little and frail

and it would be incredibly easy just to knock her over

and grab the purse. But you don't. Why not?

There are only two possible answers.

The answer of "shame and honour" culture

is that you don't do it because it would make you

a despicable person unworthy of respect.

It would dishonor your family or tribe.

People would despise you for picking on the weak.

It would not be a strong thing to do

and it is critical that strength be respected.

That approach, the professor says, is self regarding.

You are thinking almost entirely of yourself and your tribe.

You are thinking only of honour and reputation.

The second option is that you would imagine how painful it would be

to be mugged and how hard it would be for the woman

if she depended on the money in her purse

and it was taken from her.

You ask yourself, if I mug her,

what will happen to her

and what will happen to the people who depend on her.

All else being equal you want her to have a good life that is safe,

so you don't do it.

This is called the "regards for others" ethic

which is utterly different from the "shame and honour" culture.

Professor Sommerville would ask his class,

"All right, how many of you would take the purse and why not."

No one would take the purse, and the reason almost totally

is the regards for others ethic.

Then he would point out that they had chosen the Christian way of life.

The ethical system that dominated the world before Jesus

was the "shame and honour" ethic and it did not work out for the poor very well.

However, he also points out that as a culture

we have moved back towards the "shame and honour" culture

in more of a focus on ourselves over others,

even from a Christian perspective.

It's more on how we can save ourselves

by ensuring we don't jeopardize our own salvation status

by acting improperly than it is about how it impacts the other.

We help the old lady because we're expected to as Christians.

And if the wealthier among us can benefit indirectly at her expense
through the tax and financial structure of the “system,”
her individual radar doesn't cross their radar,
as they aren't directly blamed for her loss.

Another example of how our own perspective can influence how we may react
is reflected in another classroom exercise.

John Darley and Daniel Batson

decided to replicate the story of the Good Samaritan with seminary students.

A few variables were introduced.

The seminarians were interviewed and asked why they wanted to go into ministry.

There were a variety of responses,

but the vast majority said they went into ministry to help people.

Then they were asked to prepare a short sermon--

half of them on the story of the Good Samaritan

and the other half on other topics.

Finally they were told to go over to a building on campus to present their sermons.

Along the way, the researchers had strategically positioned an actor in an alley

to play the part of the man who was mugged in Jesus' story.

He was slumped over and groaning loud enough for passersby to hear.

The researchers hypothesized

that those who said they went into ministry to help people

and those who had just prepared the sermon on the Good Samaritan

would be the most likely to stop and help. But that wasn't the case.

And the reason is the final variable introduced by the researchers.

Just before the seminarians left to give their sermon,
the researcher looked at his watch and said one of two things.

To some seminarians, the researcher said, "You're late.

They were expecting you a few minutes ago. You better hurry."

To others, the researcher said,

"You're early. They aren't expecting you for a few minutes,
but why don't you start heading over there?"

Interested in the results?

Only 10 percent of the seminary students who were in a hurry stopped to help,
while 63 percent of those who weren't in a hurry stopped to help.

In several cases, a seminary student going to give his talk

on the parable of the Good Samaritan

literally stepped over the victim as he hurried on his way!

Darley and Batson concluded that it didn't matter

whether someone wanted to help people

or whether someone had just read

and was preparing to preach on the parable of the Good Samaritan.

The only thing that mattered was whether or not they were in a hurry.

They concluded, "The words, 'You're late,'

had the effect of making someone who was ordinarily compassionate
into someone who was indifferent to suffering."

Both of these examples illustrate our own personal struggle

with putting our focus on others before ourselves,

which certainly is an important aspect of this parable.

Jesus, in a very rabbinical way, leads this lawyer through the use of a parable to understand that the most offensive of outsiders, a Samaritan, is actually the one whose behavior would fit into God's kingdom, the one who shows mercy and compassion.

The assumption we are led to make is that the priest and Levite do not stop because they fear the man is dead, and they don't want to make themselves "unclean" by interacting with a corpse unnecessarily, Yet the Samaritan takes the time to find out he is in fact alive, and in dire need of assistance.

But in the spirit of our Lenten journey theme of looking at parables from different perspectives, let's take a different look at this one.

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What if the victim in the story is an outcast?

What if he is a Samaritan, or leper?

Someone who is outcast and unclean by definition?

How does that change the dynamic?

Well, certainly there is more justification for the priest and the Levite to not assist.

It would take them days to go through the ritual cleansing required to make themselves pure again,

and that would affect their livelihood in the process.

Would the Samaritan have reacted the same way if it was a leper lying in the road?

Samaritans also had purity codes to adhere to.

We often forget that they too practiced a form of Judaism as well,

which is why they were so despised by the Jews in Judea as heretics.

Would he have passed by as well rather than defile himself?

In our story, we make the assumption about why the others passed the victim by

but we aren't told for sure the exact reason.

If the victim was someone on the outside of what's acceptable,

that makes the Samaritan's actions even more selfless and Christlike.

Because that's the bigger point that Jesus makes throughout the Gospel of Luke.

He and his followers are starting something new

that doesn't rely on the letter of the law and rules of the past.

They will eat wheat they gather in the fields on the Sabbath

if they need the nourishment.

They will fellowship with Gentiles and outcasts

because the fellowship, compassion, and love

are more important than the rules and prejudices

that keep them apart.

What about us?

What if the person we encounter in beaten in the road is homeless? An addict?

Unkept and unshowered? Do we walk on by?

What if they're completely different ethnically or have a different faith? A Muslim?

We too can be challenged

by the same roadblocks to Christ-like compassion and mercy

as the characters in our story.

We too have our own prejudices and standards

that keep us from stopping.

The question we need to ask ourselves is can we too, like the Samaritan,

take our focus away from ourselves and put someone else before ourself?

This weekend I have been greatly affected by the massacres in the mosques in New Zealand.

The details are horrific, but it's the underlying cause that makes me so angry and saddened.

Like the people in the crowd around Jesus hearing this parable,

we too have our own "Samaritans," those we stereotype and outcast
because of who they are.

Instead of seeing the individual, we allow ourselves to outcast entire groups as well,

scapegoating many innocent people for the actions of a tiny few,
which leads to what happened this weekend.

As we leave here today and reflect over the next week,

let us each give some thought to who are the outcasts in our mind,
who are the Samaritans in our lives?

And how can we change that mindset so that we can stop to help,
instead of walking past in ignorance.