

“Good News in the Good Samaritan”  
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Luke 10:25-37

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. A lawyer comes up to him and asks what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus pretty much says to him, “Have you read your Bible? What does it say?” The lawyer answers correctly, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself.” Well, there you are. Love God, love your neighbor. Pretty simple. Jesus tells him that he has the right answer. And it all would have been fine if he had just stopped.

But he didn't. Luke says that he goes on to ask the question, “And who is my neighbor?” in an attempt to justify himself. You see, this man wanted the answer spelled out with specificity. No wishy-washy “love your neighbor” language. Make it concrete, Jesus. Give me something I can hang on to. Tell me exactly who my neighbor is. Who's in? Who's out? If I'm supposed to love my neighbor then I need to know exactly who counts. I need precision. Then I will have fulfilled the assignment, I can get my A, and go on to eternal life.

Funny thing. Jesus isn't much on concrete rules and specific answers. Instead of answering the lawyer's question with a list of all the qualities that one might expect to qualify a person as one's neighbor, Jesus tells a story. It's one of his most well known stories and has been interpreted in many different ways. It's so familiar, in fact, that we hardly hear it anymore.

Right. Let's see. The one who's the neighbor is the one who cares for the poor shmuck who got beat up. We're supposed to do the same. One more thing to feel guilty about if we don't help every single person we pass who needs something. Does that mean I don't get eternal life if I ignore someone with a flat tire?

One of the challenges today of hearing Jesus' stories is that we've heard them so many times that we think we know what they mean. We don't hear them in the fresh, shocking, world-rocking way that those listening to Jesus would have heard them. Frequently we take those parables, stories which effectively turned the world upside down, and we turn them into moral imperatives about being nice to strangers. For us the Samaritan has become the "Good" Samaritan, and all manner of hospitals, churches, and other "helping" organizations have been named after him. What we can't hear anymore is the powerful shock of what it meant for Jesus to use the Samaritan as the example of the neighbor. The hostility between the Jews and the Samaritans seems obscure and very distant, just some squabbling over differing religious practices. It's easy to miss how detested the Samaritans were.

In order for us to hear this story the Samaritan would have to be a member of Al Qaeda, an executive with BP, or a CEO of a Wall Street bank. How would that feel? To have Jesus come here to Hickory Neck, to a church full of good people all trying to do their best, and to tell a story in which the good people pass by on the other side, but a member of Al Qaeda is the one who sees the man in distress and who takes care of his needs extravagantly. I think it would feel like a punch in the stomach.

When Jesus asks the lawyer, “Which one was the neighbor?” the lawyer can’t even say, “The Samaritan.” He can only say, “the one who showed him mercy.” The Samaritan is the *other*, the one whom we detest, whether for the wrong religion, the wrong politics, the wrong race, culture, or ethnicity, the wrong sexual orientation, the wrong theology, the wrong class, or any number of ways in which we think of people as wrong. When you hear this parable, imagine, who is the other for you? Whose name would make you squirm if Jesus were to use that name in the story? And then, instead of imagining yourself as one of the passers by who should have done what the Samaritan did, imagine yourself as the man on the road.

Imagine that it’s late at night and your car broke down on I-64. You forgot your cell phone at home and no cars will stop. You start to walk toward an exit in the hope of getting some help. When a car finally slows down and stops, a couple of guys get out. You think they’re going to help, but instead they beat you up and rob you. There you are, lying by the side of the road, bruised, bleeding, completely unable to help yourself. You see an ambulance go by. You see a police car go by. Still no one stops. No one seems to see you. Finally, when you begin to think that death would be preferable to the pain you are feeling, a car stops. It’s your worst nightmare. This is the last person you would have expected to help you. This is the last person you would have wanted to help you. This person is your neighbor.

This is what Jesus is talking about. In the kingdom of God, there are no rules about who our neighbors are. There's no way to "get it right." Should we help other people out when we see they're in need? You bet. Of course that's a good thing to do. But this parable isn't about feeling guilty and it isn't about earning our way into heaven through our good deeds to others. When we turn Jesus' stories into a checklist for salvation, we've missed the point.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ, the *Good News* of Jesus Christ, isn't about being kind, (though being kind is a good thing.) We weren't saved because Jesus did kind things for people. It is not his kindness that he calls us to imitate. We were saved because Jesus gave up his life for his friends. We were saved, and by "we," I mean the whole world, by Jesus. It's not our job to save the world. Jesus already did. It's not our job to save ourselves. Jesus already has.

Everyone in the whole wide world is Jesus' neighbor. Who is ours?