

“Who Do We Need to be Reminded that God Loves?”

July 10, 2022

The Good Samaritan

In the reflection I recorded for the Virtually Sunday series from Whatsoever You Do, a local nonprofit that seeks to do basic good for the most needy in our community, I started out by noting that the story of the Good Samaritan is probably one of the best known Gospel passages. There are whole hospital systems named after this story. The Seinfeld series finale was based on what is called a “Good Samaritan Law,” the idea of which is that people are compelled to help someone in need if they see them.

I’ll note here that what is called the “Good Samaritan Law” here in Wisconsin is substantially different from that. Here, the “Good Samaritan Law” is that, if you offer help in an emergency situation, you can’t be sued. You heard me right. In Wisconsin, what is called our “Good Samaritan Law” is about not being sued. It’s almost like it was written by the Priest or the Levite, the people who walk on by in the Gospel.

I could go on, but that’s not the direction we’re going to go today.

Even people who don’t attend church know that, at the most basic level, a Good Samaritan is someone who helps another. In that, folks often look at this as a comfortable story. Be nice. Take care of others. But that’s really not Jesus’ point here.

Let’s start off by noting that the setting for this story is the road to Jericho. The road to Jericho doesn’t run through comfortable, familiar territory. Instead, travelers there find themselves on uncertain, dangerous ground, and while we like to imagine that we would take care of the injured man in this story, the reality is that most of us wouldn’t be in this dangerous place to begin with.

The road to Jericho isn’t on the interstate. It’s on the city streets, in a rough neighborhood, at 3 a.m. We tell ourselves that we’d take care of the man who had been robbed and beaten, but the reality is that most of us would be at home in Jerusalem, with our own kind, where the temple and the walls of the city and the institutions and community surround us, providing what we need, including a safety net if anything goes wrong. So, our first take away from this passage, right off the bat, is to recognize that we are called to behave in Godly ways EVEN when we’re in uncomfortable territory, even when we are feeling threatened ourselves.

There’s a story that appeared in the Washington Post back in 2007 that still rattles around in my brain. It’s a story about a would-be robber in Washington, DC who walked into a group of people having a backyard barbecue and pointed a gun at the head of one of the women. Somehow, everyone remained calm. Seeing her friend with a gun to her head, one woman said, “Why don’t you point that gun at me instead of her?” He did.

Then another person asked him, calmly, what his mother would think of what he was doing. He said, “I don’t have a mother.” I can imagine that at this point everyone’s hearts sunk further into their stomachs as they saw the situation going south, fast. But then, someone said, “I’m so sorry.”

Now, here's where the story gets truly remarkable. Someone else offered him a glass of wine and some cheese, and the would-be robber took his hood down, took a sip of wine and a bite of Camembert cheese and put the gun in his pants. Then the story got even stranger. According to the newspaper article, the man with the gun apologized and said, "Can I get a hug?" The guests stood up one by one and wrapped their arms around the man.

A few moments later he walked away, crystal wine glass in hand. It was a good wine they offered him, but I suspect the compassion and the hospitality were the Communion they shared.

When I read the story of the Good Samaritan, I always think of this story, think of people who were in a volatile, terror-filled situation, and who disarmed the situation with mercy and human kindness. (The Washington Post, July 12, 2007).

Now, along with being on the dangerous road to Jericho, we're told that a priest and a Levite pass by the man who has been beaten and robbed and that they don't stop to help. Some preachers have made excuses for them over the years, saying that the ritual purity laws wouldn't have allowed them to touch the bleeding man. But feminist theologian Sharon Ringe points out that not only are they on the road to Jericho, which means they're traveling away from the temple, away from their ritual obligations, and therefore would have been allowed to touch the man, the law also states that they HAD to help someone in need. So, another takeaway is that our context does not exempt us from taking care of one another.

The story that comes to mind here, for me, happened right up the street from my parents' home in Oostburg in 2010. Now, if any of you know Oostburg, you know it's a very conservative Christian town, and in 2010 a Muslim physician bought an old, unused school building waaaay on the outskirts of town, to use as a mosque. If I'm not mistaken, at the time, it would have been the only mosque within almost an hour in any direction.

The pastor of the biggest church in town rallied to block the mosque from opening. The church held meetings and staged protests, sent people to the village board meeting to testify against it, and the pastor preached against these evil outsiders. It was really, really ugly.

Nonetheless, the mosque opened in May of that year, with 19 people in attendance. The next month, a Muslim family from Chicago who was visiting family on vacation in Sheboygan had tragedy strike. Their little 9-year-old daughter, Sofia's, kayak capsized in Lake Michigan. Her father swam out to save her, but couldn't find her. First responders were called. Search and rescue was called.

And then, one of the residents, a woman who had watched all of this unfold from her picture window, a woman who belonged to the church who had been rallying against the mosque, found a way to get in touch with the Imam of the mosque her church had been protesting. As the search and rescue efforts went on, she and her fellow church members opened their homes to the missing girl's large extended family as they came to help. In short, these people who just weeks before could have been on the poster for how to call yourself Christian while living contrary to Jesus' teachings, were now LIVING this gospel story. They saw someone in need, and they helped, despite the fact that those in need were the despised other.

At the open house held at the mosque a month later to thank the community for its help, the girl's father said, "Despite her size, Sofia is the size of a bridge," he said. "She has built a bridge between these communities by her absence." Again, that second takeaway from this story is that who we are or who the other is doesn't exempt us from our duty to help those in need.

Anti-Racism

At its core, the story of the Good Samaritan is an anti-racist story. The Jews and the Samaritans were sworn enemies, and in this story, Jesus is lifting up that the person his listeners despised is the one who behaved well, while the folks they had been taught to look up to had been inhumane. The moral of this story is not just that we're called to help those in need, we're called to help our sworn enemies, those we despise.

If this story were being written in the United States today, it might be the story of the Good Russian Soldier, or the good person who is on the polar opposite side from you regarding their beliefs about abortion. At its core, the question the story of the Good Samaritan asks is, "Who do we need to be reminded that God loves?"

In no uncertain terms, Jesus is telling us that ALL people, even the ones you despise, are God's beloved. The example that comes to mind here is of the Ku Klux Klan rally in Ann Arbor, MI in 1996. Residents gathered to let the Klan know they were not welcome in their town. One of the white supremacists became separated from his group and was mobbed by the anti-KKK group who started beating him. A black teen named Keshia Thomas stepped in and covered him with her own body to protect him. It was courageous because she was putting herself in real danger by doing so.

It's easy for us to hear this story and give this young woman a well-deserved pat on the back. But I wonder if I'd be telling the story if the characters were reversed. Would I be telling the story of the good Klansman who interjected himself to save a black teen from being beaten? That's a lot harder for us to imagine, and yet, that's what Jesus invites us into in this Gospel.

Conclusion

Now, here's the thing: early on in this reflection today, I noted that most of us wouldn't even be on the road to Jericho. Most of us won't have the opportunity to interject ourselves into an angry anti-Klan mob. Most of us won't have the opportunity to open our homes to the very people our pastor has been inciting us to hate.

But that's where the plumb line from the reading from the Book of the Prophet Amos which Brittany read for us this morning comes in. The Good Samaritan ends up being our plumb line. A plumb line is a rudimentary carpentry device. Quite simply, it's a weight at the end of a string, which helps a builder to assess whether something is plumb, that is straight.

Another word for plumb is "true." Carpenters and builders use a plumb line to make sure that what they're building is level, because anything that is off level is going to throw everything else out of whack.

Most of us won't have the opportunities to be Good Samaritans, stumbling across those we despise and coming to their aid. But the Good Samaritan story can serve as a plumb line for us. We can use this story to continually assess whether the faith we are living is truly the religion that Jesus lived and taught, or have we allowed our personal biases and agendas to fog our view and re-make Jesus into our own image. Said another way, "Great occasions for serving God come seldom, but little ones surround us daily." (Francis de Sales)

One final thought before I wrap up: One of my colleagues, the Rev. Kate Matthews, asks of this passage:

"I wonder when I hear this story about what might have happened to the traveler afterward. Once his wounds were healed and his family came to get him and he went home to the security and comfort of life among his own kind, I wonder if he still laughed at Samaritan jokes. I wonder if he turned the other way when someone said unkind things about a Samaritan person, or treated them cruelly. I wonder if, maybe, his heart was broken open, permanently, long after his broken bones were healed. I wonder."

So, my prayer this week is that we will embody Christ's love and grace, not just for those who we like, not just when we feel safe, but always and everywhere toward everyone. May it be so.

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
Luke 10:25-37; Amos 7:7-9
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