

Sermon preached by Pastor Gerry Hanberry at Trinity UCC, Manchester, MD, June 21, 2020: "Does the Good Samaritan Have Anything New to Say to Us?" Based on Luke 10:25-37

Surely, the "Good Samaritan" story qualifies as one of the most popular, well-known 1st Century Bible stories. That story, that theme of the good Samaritan has had major impact on our lives and our society.

The good Samaritan has been enshrined in the names of hospitals and care centers. There are "Good Samaritan Laws" to protect from liability suits. Endless sermons have been preached on this story. So, I ask myself this week: What could possibly be left to say? You're probably wondering the same thing, right? And you're hoping I have found something new and if not new at least something interesting to say.

For me, it is often the familiar stories that are the most challenging on which to preach. But sometimes that's not because we really know the story, or have listened to it. Rather, it's because we think we know it and we have it placed in this little story book in our heads....

I do think it almost always helpful to read what has come before and what takes place after the story you're reading and trying to understand. In the case of the parable of the good Samaritan, this story takes place in the midst of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, a journey characterized by a sense of urgency. Remember now though that this urgency is not the urgency of Jesus getting to the Jerusalem as soon as possible, but it's the urgency of proclaiming the nearness of God's presence and our response to that presence.

In the latter part of Chapter 10 there are two encounters between Jesus and people who are slow to grasp what he is about. The first is with a lawyer in our text for today. The second is with two sisters, Martha and Mary. It's fascinating that Luke puts these two stories right up against one another. They have such different messages for us. One is a call to action; the other a call to spiritual contemplation...and of course, as you might be thinking right now, there is a tension between these two calls.

To the lawyer, who wants to turn the kingdom of God into a discussion group, Jesus says, **"Go and do."** But to Martha, who is a doer and gets upset that Mary is not, Jesus says, **"Sit and listen; just be."** And we wonder, "Which is it, Jesus?" We thought the message was "go and do." Isn't that the message of the parable of the good Samaritan? Go and do likewise? But then a few verses later the message seems to be different. "Sit and listen." Maybe there's more to this than we thought.

Today we focus on the lawyer. Maybe he was out there in the crowd, listening to this rabbi talking about God's wisdom revealed to the simple but

hidden from the wise. Maybe that pushed the lawyer's buttons. After all, he was among the wise.

"Teacher," said the lawyer, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" As usual, Jesus answers the question with a question. "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" Did Jesus recognize that this was someone who was looking for an argument? If so, Jesus sidestepped him. "What is written in the law?"

The lawyer answered Jesus' question by citing the great commandment, "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." It was a good answer, the right one. But Jesus didn't say, "Correct answer!" Instead he said, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

"Do this and you will live." Act on the truth you know. The lawyer had the right answers, but perhaps lacked the will to put them into effect. He did not need information, but formation. Not new thoughts, but a new being. Not knowledge, but motivation.

But the lawyer wasn't finished. Jesus had sidestepped him too easily. The lawyer was not ready to let go just yet. Luke's way of putting that is to say the lawyer, "wanting to justify himself," asked "Who is my neighbor?"

Jesus answered with a story. A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho. He was robbed, beaten, and left for dead beside the road. Two travelers went by, a priest and a Levite, or an official of the temple. But let's not be too hard on them. The road to Jericho was a dangerous stretch. Maybe they were thinking, "He could be a plant, a decoy. If I stop, they'll rob me." Or maybe they said, "Clearly it's too late to help him. Nothing I can do anyhow." So, they focused their eyes back on the road and sped up again.

In the distance a third traveler comes down the road, a Samaritan. We expect him. When we hear the word "Samaritan," we think of compassion, mercy. That's not what the lawyer would have thought. Not what the audience listening would have imagined. Not, perhaps, what the poor guy lying by the side of the road would have thought.

Remember the Gospel of John? Jews and Samaritans had nothing to do with one another. As far as Jews were concerned, Samaritans were up to no good. You locked your doors when they passed on the street. But here he comes, a Samaritan. He'll probably finish the poor guy off.

One writer said it's like "If we're white, maybe it's a black man who comes down the road and gathers us into his arms. If we're black, maybe it's somebody who is white. If we're an adult in a three-piece suit, maybe it's a teenager with orange hair and a skateboard under his arm who stops to ask "Are you okay?" If we're a teenager who has fallen off the board, maybe it's an uptight adult who

bends down to help us out. You get the idea. When everyone we thought would help walks on by, it's the stranger, the unexpected person, the one we hate, who stops to care, to help, to save us.

There's a story of a couple driving home late one night from an elegant party in their most formal clothes. The man was one of those thrill seekers. You know the type; he hates to spend any money at the gas station before he can actually smell the fumes. But he had pushed too far this time. The big old Lincoln Continental rolled to a stop on the edge of a deserted stretch of a rural highway at 1:00 a.m.

This was before the days of the ever-present cell phone. This story happened in that ancient time long, long ago when we would have thought it was unusual to see people walking around the streets talking to themselves, waving their arms wearing ear pieces... do you remember those good ole days?

So, anyway, the woman and the man were stranded in a car with no gas and no one around. The woman suggested that they hang out a flag or something to get the assistance of a passer-by. But then as they debated it, they decided that they were less in need of help than they were afraid of what that help might bring.

"Who would be out at 1:00 a.m. on the deserted highway?" They wondered. Would they unlock their door to receive help only to receive a robbery and a blow to the head? Indeed, who would be their neighbor?

Now in the end, the couple climbed out of their car into the dark night, the woman scrambling into the dirt and thick grasses in her high heeled party shoes, the man spreading his tuxedo jacket on the grass as a pillow. There, hidden in the underbrush, 15 feet from the side of the road., they slept until the next morning when the highway would be more crowded and witnesses would be there to mark their rescue. Who knows whether or not it was safer to hide in the woods or to seek help from a stranger? Back then, and I don't things are different today, maybe just much worse, of course, we have cell phones so we don't have to trust our neighbor..it is a sad comment the need for help is outweighed by fear of those around us.

Have we stopped looking for ways to help our neighbor? Have we stopped looking for good Samaritans. We've started guarding against the bad ones. Maybe, if you can't see a good Samaritan, then you can't be one...If you don't know who your neighbor is or which neighbor you will trust then maybe you can't be one either.

So, my friends, have you heard anything new in the old familiar story of the good Samaritan? I hope so. I have.

"Which of these three," asked Jesus, "was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" "The one who showed him mercy," answered the

lawyer. "Go, and do likewise," concluded Jesus.

Is there anything new in the good Samaritan? When we have experiences like these, when we choose to trust our best, God-given, Jesus-based, faith-related instincts, we find new meaning in this story, and it changes our lives. We find in this new meaning that we are willing to take the kind of risks the Samaritan took...and the impact of the story is indeed powerful in our lives. And when that happens, when you offer what you have to another person, you do so, not so much as a person of strength, but as a person who knows what it is to receive, a person who knows what it is to be desperate, a person who knows what it is to be saved.

You do so as a person who has met God in the stranger, in the unexpected person, in people who are different from you, in people you would otherwise never expect to be your neighbor, and in a score of other people whose help you never expected to need, much less receive.

Please, my friends, think about this story today. Take it as your own and reflect on what it means to you and how it might impact your life this week. It might just turn out that Jesus is right in that we need sometimes to "sit and listen," before we are really ready to "go and do likewise."

Amen.

Ps. You may want to watch this video: "Love God – Love Neighbor" a video by "The Fund for Theological Education"...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VlbnaOV8Ehk>