

March 5, 2017 ~ First Sunday in Lent

## The Man on the Ground

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Luke 10:25-37

*[The Parable of the Good Samaritan]*

<sup>25</sup> Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” <sup>26</sup> He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” <sup>27</sup> He answered, “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.” <sup>28</sup> And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

<sup>29</sup> But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” <sup>30</sup> Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. <sup>31</sup> Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. <sup>32</sup> So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. <sup>33</sup> But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. <sup>34</sup> He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. <sup>35</sup> The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ <sup>36</sup> Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” <sup>37</sup> He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

Religious purity devoid of human decency isn’t purity. It is empty, useless to everyone involved, including God – as God IS the object; and the purpose of religious purity is that we be found acceptable to God. *But NOT if your purity would have you cross the street to avoid a man beaten nearly to death,* Jesus seems to say in his parable of Luke 10.

In a contest for the worst parable title ever, *The Good Samaritan* is the hands-down winner. Nobody listening to Jesus tell it or Luke read it would have called it so. *Good* and *Samaritan* no more went together than *civil* and *war*, or *jumbo* and *shrimp*. Proper Jews knew Samaritans weren’t good – by virtue of being Samaritan.

Remember the exile? Samaritans didn’t get sent off. They stayed and intermarried with foreigners displaced into Israel. When Jews returned from Babylon, Samaritan Jews wanted to help rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. But they said, “No way, you all

are too nasty now.” So the Samaritans said, “Fine. We’ll make our own Temple on Mt. Gerizim.” But naturally the proper Jews never recognized that Temple. (You know all of this from the story of the woman at the well in John 4.) By Jesus’ day a proper Jew travelling between Jerusalem and Galilee went **around** Samaria. It was a longer, more racist, but at the same time more religiously pure, route.

Jesus himself didn’t go that long way around in John 4. Interestingly, neither does the character in his parable. The lawyer questioning him supposes Jesus is still indulging him in debating the scripture, while Luke has bigger fish to fry, if you will. As Luke tells it, Jesus has set his face to Jerusalem (9:51). From here, every action, parable and movement of his story links to Jesus’ Passion. These passion markers, so to speak, are what we shall read for, over the weeks of Lent.

To read *The Good Samaritan* as a foreshadowing of the cross, I’ll ask you to consider that parabolically speaking, Jesus himself is the man on the ground. He is the one who did not resist the violence of the world when it fell upon him, the desperation and sin that flow from the fear and anger born of the poverty and prejudice and oppression of this world. He is the one who disregarded the empty rituals and racist ways of his own religion to walk among people longing to know and worship the Creator of the universe; the innocent one whose own religious leaders rejected him, and so was eventually discovered by a stranger who, as it turned out, was not a stranger at all, but a brother, who in all likelihood read the same Scripture as his estranged, lawyer-brother in Jerusalem – the one he quotes, “*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.*”

Only, unlike his proper Jewish brothers, the Samaritan found these words to be full instead of empty. Found them to be words that guided the steps of his feet and the use of his donkey. Words that explained the purpose of time and value of money. Words that emptied his pockets but filled his heart and mind and life with unsurpassable pleasure and meaning. Far from empty, these words latched him to all that was real and true and necessary in the world: most especially, the plight of human beings. In them, he was willing to look for and to see, God’s own self.

And when one was hopeless or broken or ruined – like this one on the ground, bleeding and left for dead – he saw creation itself: in grave trouble, in great need of attention and care that he, himself, could bring. Which leaves me to wonder if this is the picture Luke sketched for the baby church to whom he wrote – a church getting organized and savvy enough to care about its reputation and future, growing selective about the subjects of its mission and ministry, as though some wrong choice exists.

I wonder if the lawyer asked *who is my neighbor* because he hoped to get away with doing as little as possible? If so, Jesus was the wrong person to ask. In my experience, Jesus’ way is never the most time-efficient way. When’s the last time you forfeited two hours to help a stranger – let alone two days? Jesus’ way seems to track according to

the slowest and neediest in a given group: the one sheep forever wandering off; having his disciples bring toddlers up front at the adult-only meeting. They roll their eyes while he plays peek-a-boo. Or in his parable: religious men with such important religious work to do cross the street while a brother bleeds out.

*Miss this, you miss me*, I hear Jesus telling the church. *Don't get so busy with your own version of religious purity, that in avoiding the interruptions you miss life together altogether – and end up empty of the very reason I gathered you in the first place; that when you fail to go slowly enough, to look closely enough at the hurt and suffering and forgotten of this world, you fail to see me.*

The Samaritan man may have been a devout Jew no proper Jew would acknowledge, and their rejection of him *their* problem, not his. But even if he wasn't, the parable still holds together beautifully. Which is the beauty of parables, of course.

I got an evening and a day with my brother Tony, this week. Tony is a good man. He's not particularly religious, but he's proud of me. He never had kids of his own but helped raise three teenagers and is now a fully vested grandpa. He and Alecha are raising two grandkids, ages two and almost four, one of whom is handicapped. I couldn't believe my ears as he described his recent interviews of daycare facilities.

Tony wouldn't get involved in a fair fight between two men, but he'd break up an unfair one. And he'd never walk by a man on the ground – or have much use for a Christian who would. He doesn't care much what you call him. He lives his life and takes care of his own. He works hard and tries to be a decent person. Essentially, he's a country music song.

The point being: if the Samaritan wasn't particularly religious, but rather a decent human being who stopped, tended his wounds and lifted the Christ figure onto his own donkey, the parable still holds together – and bears near perfect witness to the Passion to come in Luke's gospel and the church to come in his story of Acts. Strangers, foreigners, people more acquainted with human decency than religious purity recognize the Christ, while those watching for him, talking about him, remain blind. Because the man on the ground is there for everyone.

He goes where he goes, does what he does, says what he says, for anyone and everyone with ears to hear and eyes to see: for the lawyers and the Levites, the priests and the preachers, Samaritans and innkeepers, for the Sherwin-Williams manager in Sikeston, Missouri and, of course, for the church – for the very people wearing HIS heart on our sleeve, that we be found faithful in our looking and in our finding.

Would you pray with me?