

## **The Parable of the Good Samaritan** *Luke 10:25-37*

by Allen Jorgenson

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

29 But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbour?’ 30Jesus 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. 31Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. 32So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. 34He 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. 35The 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.” 36Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?’ 37He said, ‘The one who showed him mercy.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise.’

On Screen Image: No Entry

In what follows, I will make three simple observations about this text and after doing that, I will pose a couple of questions for your consideration in table groups. The three points I will discuss are

How do we read?

Who is my enemy?

What does it mean to be neighbour?

We start with “How do we read?” When discussing the parable of the good Samaritan, it is always important to note that it takes place within the context of Jesus’s dialogue with an expert in the law, sometimes called a scribe, a kind of scholar. This dialogue bookends the Parable of the Good Samaritan, and so we don’t want to forget this dialogue with the scholar. This expert in the law sets out to test Jesus: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” he asks. And Jesus answers

‘What is written in the law? What do you read there?’

Except that Jesus doesn’t really say that, since that way of translating the Greek isn’t quite accurate. Jesus says something a bit more odd. The Greek text reads:

‘What is written in the law? How do you read?’ ... How do you read?

'How' here doesn't mean 'how is it that you read, or how did you learn to read?' Nor does it mean 'how do you read: aloud or silently?' since the phenomenon of reading to yourself is a rather modern. No, the how here is meant to focus on the task of interpretation. It is almost as if Jesus asks 'What is your strategy for reading?' Do you read literally? Do you read figuratively? Do you read carefully? Or do you skim? How do you read... how do YOU read?

Image: What a Wonderful World

We learn something about the way that the scholar reads from his answer to Jesus' question regarding what is read in the law. 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 neighbour as yourself.'

Now, this is an interesting answer because the lawyer has pulled together two passages into one: one from Deuteronomy (6:5) and the other from Leviticus (19:18). That in itself isn't really so interesting, but what is actually quite interesting is that this scholar, this expert testing Jesus doesn't actually properly quote Deuteronomy 6:5, which says...

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength..

Instead, the scholar reports that the texts relates the following:

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

Notice how the scholar added a piece: he included "and with all your mind," so technically he did not answer correctly... but notice what Jesus does. He says

'You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.'

You have given the right answer. Jesus could have nailed his inquisitor to the wall, but instead he affirmed this way of reading, this way that is not literalistic, but instead a way of reading that looks for the heart of the text and then translates it so that a more fulsome reading follows. How do you read? The scholar read expansively, and Jesus says "correct!" My Jewish colleague Daniel Maoz reminds me that the Talmud says that every text has 70 faces, 70 ways of being understood, a plenitude of interpretations.

It might well be that every word of my neighbour can be heard in 70 different ways, in a plenitude of ways. How do you read? How do you interpret? How do you interpret what your neighbour says? Luther, in the small catechism, concerning the 8<sup>th</sup> commandment writes: "We should fear and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbor, betray him, slander him, or hurt his reputation, but defend him, speak well of him, and explain everything in the kindest way."

Image: Handle with Care

Point two: who is the enemy? Often the Samaritans are considered to be antagonistic to the Jews and vice versa. This is an important point to note, because the story does not stop with Jesus commending the scholar for his correct reading. The scholar, wanting to make himself right, goes on to ask: who is my neighbour, and Jesus goes on to tell this most important parable of the Good Samaritan. Bishop Johnson has nicely explicated this text, and Matthew Anderson has vividly illustrated some key themes from it in a kind of artistic fashion. As I was preparing for this study, reading commentaries, and looking at parallel passages, I took a moment to ask my aforementioned Jewish colleague Daniel about this passage. He told me that the Samaritans, for the Jews, were not considered to be of a different religion. They were thought to be within the family of Judaism. Perhaps that explains the antagonism! It can be those closest to us that are hardest to be with. Family. And it seems that Jesus, too, thought them to be family. We read in Chapter 9 of Luke that “when the days drew near for Jesus to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem, and he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him, but they did not receive him because his face was set toward Jerusalem.

Jesus planned a stay with the Samaritans along the way to Jerusalem, but it seems that the Samaritans did not appreciate Jerusalem as his destination. The Samaritans disagreed with the Jews on whether one ought to worship in Jerusalem, and because of this disagreement they refused to host Jesus. You may remember that Jesus’ disciples ask if they should pray for fire to rain on them, for this refusal, but Jesus said no. In fact Jesus rebuked them for suggesting such a thing. That is the last we hear about Samaritans before this story of the Good Samaritan, the Samaritan who chooses to be neighbour. Do you see what Jesus does? Jesus takes the enemy, the antagonist in his life and speaks him into the parable as a protagonist. Jesus makes the enemy into a hero. Who is my enemy? My enemy is the one I reach out to. My enemy is the one who needs me and invites me to be a neighbour, which brings us to point three.

Image: Madonna with Child

Point Three: what does it mean to be neighbour?

What kind of a neighbour is Jesus? What does it mean to be neighbour? What does it mean to be a neighbour in the Jesus way? It means choosing to put your enemy – even your familial enemy – in the role of the protagonist; it means giving the place of honour to those who want to throw you out. To be neighbour means to counter refusal with acceptance; to respond to enmity with compassion; to be neighbour is to speak the truth in love and to speak love into truth.

It is important to underscore that Jesus forcefully changes the question from “Who is my neighbour?” to “Who was a neighbour?” And the answer to that question is told using a story, the story of the Good Samaritan. At the heart of the story is a paradigm shift. Neighbour is first used as a noun; a neighbour is a someone, a something that you can point to, an object in our sight, used to exercise our piety. But Jesus invites us to use neighbour like a verb. We might want to recall that the English word neighbour comes from older northern European languages

in which neighbour means to be the one who dwells near. Being neighbour is about dwelling, about being near... near the wounds, near the hurts, near the suffering. We might also want to recall that the OED includes neighbour as a verb: to neighbour is to dwell alongside of. Neighbouring, it seems, gives birth to the neighbour.

Joy Kagawa, in an interview speaking about the horrific bombing of Nagasaki notes that the community that the nuclear bomb exploded directly over, was the oldest, the preeminent Christian community in all of eastern Asia.<sup>1</sup> A bomb from the Christian west dissolved the beloved from the Christian east. She speaks of the truth of this dark event: our best friend is within every enemy. To do violence to our enemy is to do violence to our friend, including the friend who I am to myself. When I wound you, I wound me. When I destroy your dwelling, I destroy mine because neighbouring is about being inter-twined. To be neighbour is to recognize that we are one human family; all made in the image of God. And to be made in the image of God is to be intrinsically related to one another. What makes us unique is not meant to divide us but to reflect God's delight in diversity: diversity in race, in religion, gender identity, sexual orientation age, the list goes on and on. To be neighbour is to choose to dwell nigh, to be with the other no matter who they are because who they are is also who I am.

So, to summarize:

To be neighbour is to read generously and sympathetically.

To be neighbour is to dwell beside so as to make an enemy into a friend.

Neighbouring is a verb, a way of being in the world, a way of love.

Image: Last Supper

Three questions for table discussion:

How do you react when someone interprets a biblical story, or another text, or some situation, in a way differently than you do?

Where have you experienced someone being a neighbour to you?

Who are people your faith community might be neighbours to?

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<sup>1</sup> Joy Kagawa, "Interview," interview by George Stoumbouloupoulis, *Tonight*, CBC, July 12, 2013, video: 9:08, <http://www.cbc.ca/strombo/videos/joy-kogawa-1>