

Today we're beginning a new summer series looking at some parables, short stories told by Jesus. Most of the parables we'll be preaching about are from Luke's Gospel. Some of them may be lesser known than others. The temptation and challenge, especially on parables that are like old friends to us, are that we think we know what they're about and are no longer caught in the mystery of them. In other words, we are no longer surprised by them. However, AJ Levine, a Jewish NT scholar at Vanderbilt Divinity School in Nashville, TN, writes that reducing parables to a single meaning destroys their aesthetic as well as ethical potential. The Gospel writers, in their wisdom, left most of the parables as open narratives in order to invite us into engagement with them (*Short Stories By Jesus*). The same parable can leave multiple impressions over time- thanks to the work of the Holy Spirit among us. Parables aren't children's stories. No, they're designed to provoke or indict. Jesus used parables to invite others to see what God is doing in the world from a new perspective. Through them, Jesus could make really bold claims that revealed truth for those who had ears to hear. "Parables aren't simple illustrations. Like Jesus, they come to us as mysteries, as depth, as encounter. Like Jesus, they are subversive and dangerous. Like Jesus, they signify more than can be said. Parables do more than point to the reign of God; they are something like narrative incarnations of it" (Paul Simpson Duke, *The Parables*). Levine says, "Religion has been defined as designed to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. We do well to think of the parables of Jesus as doing the afflicting. If we stop with the easy lessons, good though they may be, we lose the way Jesus' first followers would have heard the

parables, and we lose the genius of Jesus' teaching. We might be better off thinking less about what they 'mean' and more about what they can 'do': remind, provoke, refine, confront, disturb..." (pp. 3-4). Having said all of that, today we begin with the familiar to many parable of the Good Samaritan. But first there's an old saying in biblical studies: "a text without a context is just a pretext for making it say anything one wants" (Levine). As I often say the more we know about the original context of a selection of scripture, the richer our understanding and appreciation becomes so let's take a look.

This much loved parable is by no means simple. It requires five characters plus a gang of robbers. It's a story within another a story involving a conversation between Jesus and a certain lawyer. One scholar writes, "There is no other parable in the Jesus tradition that carries a comparable punch" (Robert Funk, Duke). "Just prior to the lawyer's appearance, Jesus has spoken of the great reversal- outsiders turned to insiders and vice versa. Hearing the exuberant report of the seventy, just returned from their mission, he thanks God: 'because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants'" (10:21). And then look who stands up at the beginning of today's story, a lawyer, more than likely representing one of 'the wise and intelligent.' Location matters. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho had quite the reputation. It was a wild and scary road with lots of switchbacks- a hilly and often dangerous 17 or 18 miles' stretch of road. Two more things to make note of before we read today's parable: 1) The Traveler- the one beat up- is more than likely a Jew

(though we aren't told; it is assumed). Scholars think he is a Jew because Jesus is talking to a Jewish audience. 2) Jews and Samaritans have had a history of disdain for one another. Yes, the "enmity between the Jews and the Samaritans was ancient, entrenched, and bitter. The two groups disagreed about everything that mattered: how to honor God, how to interpret the Scriptures, and how and where to worship. They practiced their faith in separate temples, read different versions of the Torah, and avoided social contact with each other whenever possible. Truth be told, they hated each other's guts" (Debie Thomas, [journeywithjesus.net](http://journeywithjesus.net)). Having said all of that, before reading today's parable, let us go to God in prayer. **PRAY. As you listen to God's word,** remember, when we turn to Jesus' parables, we do well to hear them as the people in the first century first heard them. **READ Luke 10:25-37.**

As a preacher's kid, I knew that the answer to most children's sermons was Jesus. I also knew the parable of the Good Samaritan and was taught to follow Jesus' lesson here to be charitable and kind like the Good Samaritan. Go and do what he did. That's all good but I always wondered if there was more and why a Samaritan? I didn't hear this parable as a challenge or an affliction. According to Jewish NT Scholar AJ Levine, if we hear a parable and we think, 'isn't that nice and lovely?,' then we aren't hearing it through the ears of the first century Jews. What would Jesus' original audience have made of this parable? Would they have agreed with it? Again, parables are meant to provoke. "Surely there is nothing wrong with interpreting the Good Samaritan parable as a 'go and do likewise' story. After all, we are called to be imitators of

Christ. The Good Samaritan offers a beautiful example to follow, and we would do well to pay attention” (Thomas). After all, we’ve named hospitals, civic organizations, nursing homes, non-profits, etc. after the “Samaritan.” We even have a Good Samaritan law that legally protects people who stop to help a stranger in need. But is this really all? Or did Jesus have something more provocative in mind (Thomas)?

Perhaps we should take another look at the larger story surrounding the parable. A lawyer approaches Jesus asking, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Some scholars believe him to be testing Jesus with this question, as it isn’t answerable because one cannot do anything to earn eternal life. It is a gift from God. I have to say that I appreciate his bold question. And in true Jesus fashion, Jesus doesn’t answer the question directly. He turns it back on his would-be-student: “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” The lawyer gives an A+ answer. “Love God with everything you got and love your neighbor as yourself.” Of course this is taken directly from Deuteronomy and Leviticus. Jesus acknowledges that this guy could’ve been a preacher’s kid knowing the right answer and encourages him to do the next step- “Do this, and you will live.” But the lawyer comes back with a really important, clarifying question” “Who is my neighbor?” Many scholars believe that what the lawyer is really asking is “Who is not my neighbor?” How much love are we talking here, Jesus? Can you be more specific? I mean, there are lines, aren’t there? He wants to justify himself in case what he is challenged to do is beyond his capacity. Of course Jesus doesn’t take the bait and hurls a parable at the lawyer.

I'm not going to repeat the parable nor am I going to spend time going through possible reasons why the priest or levite didn't stop to help the half dead man in the ditch. But I do wonder why Jesus brought up the priest or the levite. I don't believe them to be symbols of what is wrong with the law or with Judaism, as many have claimed, but simply a failure to do what needs to be done. So then why did Jesus speak explicitly of a priest and a Levite? "The duo anticipate, in good folkloric fashion, the appearance of a third figure" (Levine). There is this thing called the rule of three. Let's try it . Father, Son, and ? Larry, Moe, and ? Among Jesus' Jewish audience the third of the group was obvious: an Israelite. Surprised that the first two didn't follow the law and show compassion, they were ready to hear about the Israelite hero who helped the beaten man. A priest, levite and an Israelite- rule of three. But that is NOT what Jesus said because Jesus is telling a parable and parables never go the way one expects. Jesus told of the hero being a Samaritan, a hated outsider to the Jews. "In modern terms, this would be like going from Larry to Moe to Osama bin Laden" (Levine). There was no "good" regarding Samaritans at least not in a Jewish person's mind. Notice that Jesus doesn't call the Samaritan "good." That is an adjective that has been adopted along the way. Notice also that the lawyer cannot even say the name "Samaritan" when Jesus asks him who out of the three was a neighbor to the man in the ditch. He answers, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus was radical and risky and stunned his Jewish listeners with parables. "He was saying your neighbor is the one who scandalizes you with compassion. Your neighbor is the one who upends all your entrenched categories and shocks you with a fresh face of God. Jesus

was asking them to dream of a different kind of kingdom. He was inviting them to consider the possibility that a person might add up to more than the sum of her political, racial, cultural, and economic identities. He was calling them to put aside the history they knew, and the prejudices they nursed. He was asking them to leave room for divine and world-altering surprises” (Thomas).

Something to think about. What if this is another reversal story? What if the story changes depending on where we locate ourselves within the story? Growing up, I was taught to see myself as the Samaritan in the story and to go and do likewise. But if we too easily and comfortably identify with the Samaritan, we might be missing the point. What if we aren't the Samaritan? What if we are the person left for dead in the ditch? How does that change our perspective? What if we are the one with no identity left naked, beaten and in desperate, life-saving need. “Maybe we have to occupy his place in the story first- maybe we have to become the broken one, grateful to anyone at all who will show us mercy- before we can feel the unbounded compassion and mercy of the Samaritan. Why? Because when you're lying bloody in a ditch, what matters is not whose help you'd prefer, whose way of practicing Christianity you like best, whose politics you agree with. What matters is whether or not anyone will stop to show you mercy before you die” (Thomas). Can we finally agree that it is better to acknowledge the humanity and the potential to do good in the enemy, rather than to choose death? Will we care for our enemies, who are also our neighbors” (Levine)? Jesus tells us we must. Here he invites his original

audience and us today to reconsider our foundational understandings of neighbors and mercy. To love God is to love our neighbor as ourselves. The order here is very important. It is very hard to love the unlovely neighbor until our hearts are filled with the love of God. In other words, “if costly acts of love are extended to others out of gratitude for the love of God, then we are sustained by God’s unwavering love” (Kenneth Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*). *As we think about relationships on this Father’s Day and Juneteenth...what if this was the parable of the Good Muslim or Bible Thumping Fundamentalist? The Good White Supremist or Black Lives Matter Activist? The Good Undocumented Immigrant or Border Patrol Agent? The Good Far-Right Republican or Liberal Democrat? The Good Transgendered Person or Homophobe? The Good Environmentalist or the Person Who Thinks Global Warming is a Hoax? Feeling afflicted yet? Jesus tells us to, “Go and do likewise. Suffer the vulnerable-making affliction of this. Recognize yourself in the desperate victim, and allow the one you hate the most to snatch you back from death. Do this and you will live”* (Thomas). Amen!