

Akron Christian Reformed Church

Harry Winters

July 14, 2019

Romans 5.1-11; Romans 12.9-21; Luke 10.25-37

Following the Samaritan or, Making Ourselves Into Neighbors

Prayer: Dear Jesus, don't pass by us this morning, but stop and speak to us your word of life. Then open our hearts and minds so we may absorb your grace. Allow our lives to be nourished as this grace intimately penetrates into our being, so that we, having been transformed, may radiantly reflect your truth into the world that surrounds us. Amen.

We've all heard this Good Samaritan story quite often, and so we tend to stop listening. This will even be the third time I've preached on this story in the last five years. I was tempted therefore, to skip it, but I changed my mind because it's so significant to our day and age.

One of the problems with evangelicals, whose thinking is creeping into everything, is that we are selfish. Evangelicals are selfish and we defend it theologically. We think about ourselves above all else. We tend to make the entire Christian faith revolve around the issue, "I, myself and me, going to heaven when I die." For evangelicals, personal salvation is the focus of the Gospel. "Jesus came so that I can accept him into my heart so that I will go to heaven when I die." Which is a self-centered faith.

Now, to be fair this isn't solely an evangelical problem, other Christian traditions have also picked up this self-centered emphasis of the Christian faith. And the Jews, during the time of Jesus, have also made the Jewish faith all about themselves, and even about what they will receive when they die.

So, one day a lawyer walks up to Jesus and asks him: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" And, quite honestly, this question is so highly offensive that Jesus must have wanted to pull his own hair out.

This lawyer has taken the entire Jewish faith tradition and has reduced it to being nothing more than the way that this one lawyer will slip into heaven when he dies. He's taken the entire Jewish tradition and removed the idea that God's relationship with the Hebrews as a people exists so that the nations are blessed through them. This lawyer guy comes along and wants to make faith all about himself. That's one problem with this lawyer's question.

Another problem with his question is that he seems to think that he can do something so that he may inherit heaven when he dies. Which is an evangelical problem as well. We evangelicals, even though we profess to believe in grace, have very clearly created self-righteous paths of action that we believe lead us right into God's bosom when we die. And so, this lawyer, and by extension we as well, has fallen for the age-old sin of trying to save himself by doing something. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

And Jesus, being patient actually, doesn't embarrassingly reveal this guy's malformed theology. Jesus simply asks the lawyer, "What's the law say? How do you interpret it?"

And, this lawyer must have been listening to Jesus, because he quotes Jesus back to himself. "Love God with everything I have, and love my neighbor as myself."

So, Jesus says, “You’re right. Go and do that and you’ll live.” But notice the subtle shift. Jesus doesn’t say, “Go and do that and you will go to heaven when you die.” He doesn’t say: “Go and do that and you will inherit eternal life.” He doesn’t say those things. You see, he’s rejected the lawyer’s premise that he can do anything to earn eternal life.

Instead, Jesus says, go and love God and love your neighbor and “you will live.” You will be fully alive. To Jesus, life begins now, not when we die. Love God and neighbor and you will be living the Kingdom life, already, right now, and then just let eternity take care of itself.

But alas, the lawyer misses the subtle shift and he begins to struggle through some theological calculations in his head. He starts adding up his love of God in one column, and his love of his neighbor in another column. And he gets through the God column rather quickly.

“I follow the law. I follow all of the rules that the Rabbis have created. I observe the Sabbath. I eat only kosher food. I give away at least ten percent. I avoid the dirty foreigners. Yada. Yada. Yada.” And in his mind, he concludes, I do all of that for God, so I love God with every part of myself. I’m okay there.

But he’s having trouble with the arithmetic in the “loving his neighbor” column. He’s not sure that he’s loved far enough away from himself to be able to say with confidence: “I love my neighbor.” Maybe there’s someone out there, who the lawyer doesn’t quite consider to be a neighbor, but Jesus does. Some person on the edge of neighboriness. He needs a ruling. He needs the judge, the umpire.

So, he asks: “As far as loving my neighbor, Jesus, could you tell me who my neighbor is?” Now, I suspect that the lawyer believes that he does love his neighbor enough. But, just to be sure, “Who is my neighbor?” he asks.

Jesus looks at him for a bit. Then Jesus tells the story that we call “The Good Samaritan.” You all know that story.

(One day three guys walk into a bar – a Rabbi, a Levite and a Samaritan. Oops, wrong story.) One day three guys walk down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho when they all come upon a beaten and hurt man.

A Rabbi, when he sees the hurt man, walks past him. A Levite, who is the Rabbi’s helper in the synagogue, when he sees the hurt man, walks past him.

And lest we judge them too harshly, both are probably trying to get home to Jericho after serving in the temple in Jerusalem for three weeks. Both are exhausted. Both are still ceremonially clean and if they touch this man, and he’s either dead or not a Jew, they would become unclean, and then they’d have to go through another whole week of purification, and they’ve already missed too much work in their Jericho synagogue. In addition, both are probably afraid that the robbers who hit this man will come and beat them if they linger on this dangerous stretch of road.

Martin Luther King says that both ask themselves the question “What might happen to me if I stop to help this person?” Which is not an unreasonable question.

And, at this point in the story, Jesus would pause and look into the lawyer’s eyes, to see if he’s following along. And of course, he is. The lawyer gets it so far. Nothing revolutionary here.

But, then, Jesus twists the story as well as M. Night Shyamalan twists stories. The lawyer never sees it coming. Jesus says, “But then, along comes a Samaritan who has compassion on this dying man.”

“What? A Samaritan? A Samaritan with compassion for a Jew? Why would you tell a story with a Samaritan in it? Especially one who is kind?” That’s what the lawyer is thinking when he hears this twist.

And you’ve all heard it before too, this story is scandalously shocking to the lawyer and to the rest of the Jewish audience. All of the good and righteous people who’ve kept the law, in the very same way this lawyer has kept the law, they all know that they would’ve kept right on walking too. They all have their good reasons to ignore this hurt man.

Whereas the Dirty Samaritan stops? Scandalous. It’s an impossible twist.

Samaritans are the enemy. They can’t be trusted. They can’t be given an inch. They’ll cut your throat every time – everyone knows this. Jesus knows this. Samaritans are hooked up with Isis and will suicide bomb you as soon as possible. That’s the kind of thinking that Jesus and this lawyer were raised to think. The Samaritan is the enemy.

It would be like saying to an Evangelical: One day a Southern Baptist Minister, an Elder in his church, and a radicalized terrorist from ISIS walked down a street and only the radicalized terrorist showed mercy to a Christian boy who’s been beaten up and left in the road. It’s a scandalous story. Our chauvinism makes it impossible to believe that an ISIS fighter would do that, just as the Jewish chauvinism makes it impossible to believe that a Samaritan would do that.

But there it is. The Despicable Samaritan takes care of the wounded man, and then even delivers him to an inn in Jericho, which is a Jewish city, for more care to be given to him. And the Samaritan doesn’t just drop the guy off at the door, he promises to pay the cost of the room and board and medicine for as long as it takes. Ken Bailey says that’s like an Indian carrying a soldier with three arrows in him into an Army fort and telling them to take care of the soldier and that he, the Indian, would pay for it.

Impossible. It’s just too outrageous.

“Who was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” Jesus quietly asks.

“That dirty disgusting bastard.”

Go and live like him and then you’ll be loving your neighbor, and then you’ll truly be living. Be like a loving Isis terrorist and then you will be alive. Then you will be fully human.

But did you notice the subtle shift at the end. The lawyer starts with, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus ends with, “Which of these three acts like a neighbor?”

The lawyer is looking around trying to discern who’s his neighbor and who isn’t. The Samaritan makes himself into the neighbor of the man who is hurting, so that he can take care of him. The Samaritan makes himself into the neighbor even when he hates the man lying in the road. Martin Luther King says that the Samaritan asks himself the question, “What will happen to this hurt man if I don’t stop?” And so, he stops. He’s makes himself into this dying man’s neighbor.

Jesus tells the lawyer to stop trying to assess who out there is your neighbor so that you can figure out if you have a responsibility or not. Jesus says, begin by thinking of yourself as a neighbor. Begin by making yourself into a neighbor, and then you have a responsibility to love anyone, anyone who is in need regardless of their nationality, regardless of their race, regardless of their religion, regardless of their political affiliation. None of that matters because you have already made yourself

into their neighbor, and so, you must love them. Begin by making yourself into a neighbor and then even your enemy deserves your love. That's what the Samaritan does.

I'm so tired of the evangelical church making faith all about me, myself and I going to heaven. I don't even think that I'll consider myself an evangelical anymore because the neo-evangelicals are simply selfish, cruel and exclusive. Connie's been telling me for years, "We're not evangelicals." I kept saying, "Yes we are." Now, I think Connie's right, we're not evangelicals. That label doesn't stick to us. We're Kingdom people.

We've heard the call of Jesus to follow him and to live in his Kingdom, right now, today. Which means, as we follow him, we're called to act like him in this world. We're called to truly live, or to truly be human, by loving people, including our enemies.

Jesus teaches us today that faith is about us making ourselves into the neighbors of anyone who is in need in this world. The Kingdom of God is wide open and welcoming, it doesn't see enemies, and that's our home as we follow Jesus.

And you all know where I'll go with this, especially on a weekend when ICE is rounding up thousands of our neighbors and tearing them out of their homes all across this country to the applause of evangelicals. Make no mistake about it, Jesus teaches us that these are people whom we love even though we've never met them because we've made ourselves into their neighbor.

Let me leave you with one more consideration. In our parable, who do you think the Good Samaritan is? Who is it? Who's the most scandalous person you can imagine? Who's our greatest enemy who made himself into a neighbor?

Go and act like him.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.