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“Good Neighbors”
Amos 7:7-17 Luke 10:25-37 Colossians 1:1-14

I had served as an Associate Pastor for 10 years. It was my first Sunday in the pulpit of my very first solo pastorate. The service started at 11:00 a.m. but I didn't get to start my sermon until noon. ☹ In honor of my first Sunday there, one of the members had gotten the children together to put on a skit based on the parable I just read. I don't know how much they rehearsed, but the director made a big mistake. At the last minute he chose a girl who was visiting the church for the first time to play the part of the Good Samaritan.

In the beginning, everything went according to plan. The robbers robbed on cue and did a fine job. The man who was beaten did a fine job of being mugged and moaned appropriately. The High Priest came by and passed by on the other side. The Levite followed suit and passed by on the other side. But when the little girl who had never been to our church before took her turn, she also passed by on the other side!

There was a collective, audible, gasp from the congregation. This was not how the story is supposed to go.” The director started talking forcefully to the last-minute-drafted-visitor to go and help the boy that was moaning. She didn't want to. She didn't even know the boy OR the story. The director kept insisting. The “supposed-to-be” Good Samaritan started crying.

Finally, the Levite went back and helped the moaning man on her donkey and took him to the inn and offered to pay for any subsequent medical help instantly transforming Jesus' parable into the parable of the Good Levite.

Even though the last minute recruit to be the Good Samaritan got her part wrong she wound up getting it right. Why? Because when Jesus told the parable the FIRST time it had a surprise ending.

When the story was told the first time it was in response to a question. True to form, Jesus does not give the lawyer a straight answer. Instead, he tells him a story. Jesus knows that effective learning doesn't occur through telling another what to believe. Effective learning occurs through allowing the other person to discover truth for himself. That's why rabbis rarely answer questions directly. They tell stories to make you ask questions and then they answered your questions with a question. Why? To make their students dig....to make their students search, to make them wonder, to make them explore. To make them discover the answers for themselves.

When Jesus first told the story it was following the traditional form of rabbinical teaching. They always gave two negative examples followed by a positive example. This was sizing up to be a juicy anti-clergy joke. When the high priest

walked by on the other side, the crowd thought to themselves, "Yeah those high priests, they're so heavenly minded that they're no earthly good." When the Levite walked by on the other side the crowd thought to themselves, "Those Levites think they're so special because they were born into the priestly tribe. They're so holier than thou."

The crowd was more than ready for the hero to come, a good Jewish working man. But the joke was on them. The punch line hit them hard. They thought, "A SAMARITAN? Did you notice that nowhere in the story is the word Good appear?"

In the time of Jesus the question of who should be treated in a loving, neighborly way was a real hot potato. THEY had an immigration issues. Gentiles had entered Palestine. Should Greeks, Romans and Syrians be treated as neighbors? Some of the Pharisees even excluded some of their fellow Jews from the circle of neighbors who lived in rural areas because they lived next to those unclean immigrants and they could not keep the ceremonial law as vigorously as those in urban areas could. Others considered their enemies as being unworthy of neighborly treatment.

With his question, the lawyer is implying, "I have no problem with loving God and loving myself, but figuring out who is my neighbor is difficult. How far do I carry this 'love your neighbor' stuff?"

Two thousand years later this parable has become part of our culture. People who have never read the Bible know what a Good Samaritan is. He's a do-gooder. She's a bleeding heart. Some counseling centers are known as Samaritan Centers, and there is even a travel trailer club known as "The Good Sam Club," with their own logo of a cute, little guy with a wry smile wearing a halo around his head--"The Good Sam."

In the last official episode of Seinfeld the quartet of Jerry, George, Elaine and Kramer were jailed because they failed to help a fellow citizen who was being robbed. They were jailed for not obeying the "Good Samaritan" law.

Our familiarity with "The Good Samaritan" may mask its shocking first century effect. Samaritans were despised. They had intermarried with foreigners, mixed with heathen, lived apart from other Jews and kept their religion in a different way through worshiping not at the Temple in Jerusalem but at their own Temple on Mt. Gerizim. Worst of all, sometime between the years 9 and 6 BC, very near the time of Jesus' birth, the Samaritans had gone to the Temple in Jerusalem and scattered human bones over it, defiling it, and making it impossible for the Jews that year to observe Passover. Notice that when Jesus reveals the story's hero to be a Samaritan, the lawyer is so taken aback that he cannot even voice the word Samaritan.

One hot day in June a Texas jailer suddenly stopped breathing. He was outside of a holding cell in the basement of the Weatherford District Courts Building. The men in the cell were waiting court appearances when the guard sitting outside their pen slumped onto the floor. As soon as the jailer went down, they started to yell. When that didn't attract the attention of anyone upstairs, the group of eight or so inmates, all of whom were shackled, broke out of their holding cell. "They grabbed his radio and tried to radio for help.

Deputies upstairs heard the commotion. They came down and called for emergency personnel, who performed CPR on the jailer and used a defibrillator to shock his heart. He stopped breathing. They couldn't find a pulse on him. The entire incident was captured on surveillance video.

The jailer, who doesn't want to be identified, is healthy now and is returned to work that next Monday. The Police chief said, "The holding cell only has a "pretty flimsy lock gate" on it, unlike the reinforced doors of jail cells. All the inmates, they're in handcuffs, they just stick them in there so they're not wandering around and so they don't grab somebody's gun." He praised the altruistic inmates for their quick action. "They definitely saved his life. There's no doubt about that," he said. That my friends, is the parable of the Good Criminals.

If we are to love the Lord with all our heart and all our being and all our strength and all our minds...and ...as Jesus ALSO said....IF we are to love our enemies ...who does that leave that we are exempt from loving? No ONE.

The love for equals is a human thing of friend for friend, brother for brother. It is to love what is loving and lovely. The world smiles.

The love for the less fortunate is a beautiful thing the love for those who suffer, for those who are poor, the sick, the failures, the unlovely. This is compassion, and it touches the heart of the world.

The love for the more fortunate is a rare thing to love those who succeed where we fail, to rejoice without envy with those who rejoice, the love of the poor for the rich, of the black man for the white man. The world is always bewildered by its saints.

And then there is the love for the enemy-- love for the one who does not love you but mocks, threatens, and inflicts pain. The tortured's love for the torturer is God's love. It conquers the world.

This story tells us that there are no limits as to who is our neighbor. And there are no neighbors we are not to love. The lawyer knew that the law said that he was to love his neighbor as himself. The loophole he was looking for was the definition of who his neighbor was. If the lawyer could define someone as NOT his neighbor he could exempt himself from loving that person. But in the family

of God, the human family, there are no fences, only friendly backyards where folks talk to each other and have weekend barbecues.

Eugene Peterson, the Presbyterian Pastor who wrote his own translation of the Bible called the Message says that parables are narrative time bombs designed to explode people into new awareness. In this case one of the pieces of shrapnel is designed to tear into the idea that the law will ever save anybody.

Jesus is exposing the futility of the law as a way to inherit eternal life. After all, the Samaritan who finally reached out did so not as a result of law but of grace. The finer points of the law that they Priest and the Levite observed religiously left a man half-dead in the ditch! The law leaves us all there. Grace is what lifts all of us out. If God had not been gracious with us, we'd all be in the ditch

We are in this story. We live out this story every day. Sometimes we may be the robbers. Sometimes we act like the high priest or the Levite. Sometimes we act like the Samaritan. Sometimes WE are lying in the ditch.

Who is your neighbor? Who is counting you to be their good neighbor? Good neighbors are about good consensus. Good neighbors are about coming to our senses. It takes us coming to the conclusion that we've all been in the ditch and it is only because of our Lord who told the story that picked us up, bound our wounds, loaded us up and took us to safety that we have survived to return the favor.

Maya Angelou once said, "Hate has caused a lot of problems in this world, but it hasn't solved one yet. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness. Only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate. Only love can do that." He also said, "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter."

Our silence, our inaction is passing by on the other side no matter who is in the ditch. We are to be people of compassion who do not judge people by their status in the world, the color of their skin, their beliefs, their nationality or their situation in life. We are not to pass by the man in the ditch we are to help him. We are not to give up on those who have been walking by on the other side, but to help them too. Why? Because sometimes, even Levites have been known to double back..

Like that child playing the part of a Levite in a play my first day at St. Andrew in San Antonio modeled for us all, sometimes even a Bad Levite can double back become a Good Levite. Sometimes even handcuffed inmates will break out of cell to be Good Criminals. Sometimes, yes sometimes even we can break out of our comfort zones to be. ... good neighbors

Let's pray. Almighty God, heavenly Father of us all, we are part of one race, the human race. We are all brothers and sisters called to help each other in need. Convince us in our minds, our hearts, and our social attitudes, to accept the family of which we are all a part and to give of ourselves to one another--to pass on, to pay forward, to share the love of Jesus with our neighbors.

Lord God of compassion, we praise you for all the times you have helped us in our times of trouble, when we were beat up and left for dead in the ditch. We give you thanks for the life and teachings of your Son, Jesus Christ. Help us to understand what it means to minister to our neighbor, and give us the determination and the will to pay the cost in time, effort, inconvenience, and money to show your love to those in need.

Bonus Poem for those reading online

Poem #730) Mending Wall –Robert Frost

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
And spills the upper boulders in the sun;
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.

The work of hunters is another thing:
I have come after them and made repair
Where they have left not one stone on stone,
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,
To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,
No one has seen them made or heard them made,
But at spring mending-time we find them there.

I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;
And on a day we meet to walk the line
And set the wall between us once again.
We keep the wall between us as we go.

To each the boulders that have fallen to each.
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls
We have to use a spell to make them balance:
"Stay where you are until our backs are turned!"
We wear our fingers rough with handling them.
Oh, just another kind of outdoor game,
One on a side. It comes to little more:

He is all pine and I am apple-orchard.

My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
He only says, "Good fences make good neighbors."

Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head:
"Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it
Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.

Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offence.

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down!" I could say "Elves" to him,
But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather
He said it for himself. I see him there,
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.

He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
He will not go behind his father's saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well
He says again, "Good fences make good neighbors."