

The Parable of Good Questions

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Texts: Deuteronomy 30: 9-14

Luke 10: 25-37

some sentences and portions of this original manuscript differ from the video recording of this sermon

Will you please pray with me? May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing to you Oh God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

The parable of the Good Samaritan. One of the most well-known parables to be told by Jesus. What we don't often consider is that this parable is the first of two illustrations of the commandments to love God and love neighbor. Spoiler alert: This one is illustrating how to love our neighbor and as we will reflect on together so much more. Next week we will wrestle with another difficult passage which addresses how to love God with a similarly complicated interpretive history, the story about Mary and Martha when Jesus comes to visit their home. The stories are well known but are not often well known as a pair, so we get the chance this time around to treat them as such. Ok, now that we are oriented, back to what we are dealing with this week.

We read this story of the Good Samaritan and it's hard to come up with something that hasn't already been said about this narrative and yet it's important to return to places that we think we know as if it were for the first time. Let's see what comes of it this time around. It's a familiar story one of a man coming across a crew of people who did him harm. He lays down in a ditch, injured and alone and three men come across him on a well-traveled, but dangerous road. The first two, a priest and a Levite, who the audience and the law expert would expect to stop and help him, walk right on past this man in pain. The third person, a Samaritan man, someone

representing a group of people who were not well regarded by the hearer of this parable, not only stops to care for the injured man, but goes above and beyond what one would expect, even going so far as to set him up with housing and care for after the Samaritan man has left. He is an unexpected participant in bringing about God's kingdom on earth, grounding us in one of the central themes of the Gospel of Luke-toppling expectations about what God's kind of world looks like and who and what brings about the kind of liberation God inspires.

The parable serves as a reply to the question of an expert of the law asking Jesus, "who is my neighbor? perhaps looking to limit the scope of what his responsibility is to other people." Jesus at the end of the story asks the law expert in reply, "Which of these three men, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise." These questions lead us to not only notice the twist of Jesus putting the expert's question back on him by focusing on who is acting like a neighbor instead of who is identified as a neighbor, but also points to God's unimaginably generous love and mercy coming from unexpected places and circumstances.

A friend and neighbor the other day reminded me that some cable channels like the Hallmark channel do week-long programming themes called "Christmas in July" where they show Christmas movies all week in the middle of the summer. She told me this as she was updating me about this pool floatie that is shaped like an ugly Christmas sweater she was trying to order, which had me equally delighted and confused. As someone who's favorite season is summer, I've been perplexed by this strange phenomenon. Why would someone want to be reminded of the short days of winter when the ocean exists? That being said I experienced my own Christmas in July moment when I came across a quote from Rev Dr. Jill Richardson, a pastor in Illinois from around Christmastime last year this week. She said recalling her preaching schedule, "Last week I

preached on Elizabeth, the disgraced barren woman God chose. This week it's Mary, the poor teenage girl. God begins the new kingdom and covenant with women. Not even powerful women. Overlooked women. They begin it all."

Overlooked women, despised Samaritan men, a eunuch from out of town, these people often put into a box by their society make way for Christ in the world despite what others wrongly assume of them. One commentary notes that the real punch line of the parable of the Good Samaritan is that one way to look at this story is to see the Samaritan as a Christ figure, as he is the one performing divine actions of compassion and mercy. The very person the expert in the law was perhaps looking to avoid calling his neighbor is the Christ figure of this wisdom vignette. It started begging the question, what things, topics, or people do we avoid that by learning from them might lead us closer to Christ and to God's transformative liberation in our lives? By ridding ourselves of our assumptions what people with viewpoints different from our own might lead us into following the sacred commandment to love and show mercy in this life? To me, and maybe you, this time around the parable of the Good Samaritan is inviting us to repent of our assumptions about the limitations of where God can show up.

Something that was also striking this time around reading this familiar passage was how many questions frame the story of these 4 men on the road. Jesus rarely answers questions and most often when he does, he answers them with another question like he did in our passage for today. In fact, he asks about 307 questions in the Gospels and yet we often associate Jesus with the person we seek answers from. We often desire this from the practice of our faith as well. We yearn for the comfort of answers in our faith journeys, to have a solution to the problems of the human condition, to be able to say some semblance of words that could heal the grief and trauma all of us have known in one way or another. And when we look again at this familiar parable that teaches

to love our neighbor as ourselves, perhaps a part of us wonders amidst its simplicity, is it possible for us to love everyone that much? As we continue to think about the seemingly insurmountable task, in a moment's pause, we hesitate to ask, do I really even love myself?

Asking these things of ourselves might cause us discomfort as we'd prefer to read this parable and say to ourselves: I identify with the Samaritan who stops on the side of the road and gives everything he has to a stranger, to uncomplicatedly align ourselves with the overflowing mercy and compassion of God. While acknowledging our beloved-ness I think the discomfort is needed. We need to ask the hard questions of ourselves and each other and be ok with not having the answers. Dwelling in the questions instead of certainty inspires a healthy humility of spirit that is so needed in these days of hatred and polarization and is so needed when striving for the kind of liberation that is good news for us all. In our lives it's often discouraged, even considered unholy not to have answers to questions, not to have a plan or a 100% certain orientation to the world and what you know to be true. I'm sure our recent high school graduates feel and have felt the pressure of that expectation navigating questions about college admissions or life plans all of last year. Perhaps what this parable is showing us today is that while uncomfortable, asking the hard and right questions and being open to different answers than we thought might be the radical and holy work that leads us into what at first seemed impossible, fully loving our neighbor.

The last portion of our first reading from Deuteronomy is a helpful foil to the challenges in this parable. In regards to the law, that is loving God and loving neighbor it reads, "Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. **12** It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up to heaven for us and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?' **13** Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will cross to

the other side of the sea for us and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?' **14** No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe."

The impossibility of the kind of overflowing love and mercy of the Samaritan man and of God and the reassurance of the nearness of the law to us to enact that kind of love is what we hold in tension when we wrestle with our capacity for this experience of being fully human. May we humbly embrace the hard questions, may we look in unexpected places for mercy and love to show up, and may we be surprised by the nearness of God in doing so. Amen.

