



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

760 East Broad Street • Columbus Ohio 43205 • (614) 221-6552 • fax (614) 221-5722 • www.bspc.org

“The Bounds of Love”

Luke 10:25-37

July 14, 2019

Reverend Ann Palmerton
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, OH

Whether we grew up in church or not, most of us have heard the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Whenever Jesus tells a parable, he hopes we’ll learn something about ourselves. The problem is, he rarely tells us how to do that. Often, we try to figure out what we need to figure out by identifying with one or more of the characters. This story has four main characters. The victim – someone in need – someone literally “kicked to the curb,” a ‘saver’ – the person who helps, and two ‘avoiders’ – people who walk by. There’s also a ‘provider,’ the innkeeper, but that character can wait for another sermon!

Years ago, researchers conducted an experiment with students at my alma mater, Princeton Theological Seminary. They gathered a group of seminarians in a classroom and gave them an assignment. “Your job is to record a talk about the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Recordings will be done in a building on the other side of campus. We’re working a tight schedule, so you’ll need to hurry to that building.” What the students don’t know is that on the path to the other location, an actor is playing the part of a person in distress. That person slumps on the ground, as if suffering. Students are pressed for time. One by one, they hurry to make a presentation about the parable.

When they actually encounter someone in need, will they be ‘savers?’ Will they be Good Samaritans?

Well ... no, they won’t. Nearly all of them rush by. One student even steps over the person in his hurry to teach about the Parable of the Good Samaritan!¹

Now before we look down on these students, these future ministers – let’s think about how we may have done in this experiment. Would we be any better? They struggle to put the Parable into practice, and so do we. It is one thing to know intellectually what the right thing to do is. It is another thing to do it.

A lawyer approaches Jesus, to test him: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Jesus doesn’t answer directly. Always a good rabbi, he responds to a question with a question: “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” The lawyer gives Jesus the right answer:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself (Luke 10:27).

Jesus congratulates him on his knowledge: “Do this, and you will live.”

¹ Darley, J. M., and Batson, C.D., “From Jerusalem to Jericho: A study of Situational and Dispositional Variables in Helping Behavior.” Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1973, pp. 27, 100-108.

But the lawyer keeps pushing. He works all the possible details and angles. “Who is my neighbor?” Or, put another way: “Who is *not* my neighbor? Where can I draw the line? Outside my front door? At the edges of my neighborhood? How much love are we talking about?”²

In response, Jesus tells a story. A story with a character we recognize. We’ve named hospitals and relief agencies after him. Here in Ohio, we have a law in his honor: a modern-day “Good Samaritan” who helps in an emergency enjoys legal protections.

A man walks down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. Members of an armed gang attack him and leave him to die. Two people of faith who work in the temple pass by on the other side.

Jewish scholar Amy-Jill Levine wrote a book called *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*. In it, she writes about the ‘avoiders,’ about the refusal of the priest and the Levite to come to the aid of the man in the ditch.

The best explanation I’ve heard...comes from Martin Luther King, Jr., who preached: “I’m going to tell you what my imagination tells me. It’s possible these men were afraid....And so the first question that the priest [and] the Levite asked was, ‘If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?’ ...But then the Good Samaritan came by, and he reversed the question: ‘If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?’” King went on, “If I do not stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to them?” King then went to Memphis, and it was there he was assassinated. There are bandits on the road.³

A Samaritan sees the man and is moved. He feels empathy. That gut feeling leads him to act in a loving way. He bandages the man’s wounds, anoints them with oil and wine, and carries him to the nearest inn on his own animal. He pays the innkeeper, not for one-time aid, but for long-term care. He promises to return with more money as needed.

Jesus asks, “Which of the three is a neighbor to the man who was robbed?” The answer is obvious, “The one who shows him mercy.” “Go and do likewise,” Jesus says. “Do this and you will live.” *Do* this. Draw close. Show mercy. Extend kindness. Don’t just *think* love. *Do* love.

Being a Good Samaritan is a worthy goal toward which can we strive. But so often we are ‘avoiders’ like the priest and the Levite. We see a need and pass by. Many times I get off the freeway at the Broad Street exit and see people with signs asking for money. These folks aren’t bleeding, but they often look half dead. I keep my distance because I’m in a hurry or fearful. Still, the Good Samaritan stands as a shining example we all aspire to follow.

But then again, maybe the whole point of the parable is that the Good Samaritan is *not us*. Maybe Jesus’ parable isn’t as much an example story as a *reversal* story. A story that flips our categories of good and bad. Jesus tells it in the context of bitter hatred between Jews and Samaritans. The two groups disagree about how to honor God. They worship in separate temples and read different versions of the Torah. They avoid social contact. They hate each other. We’re inclined to like the Good Samaritan, but Jesus’s choice to make him the hero of his parable shocks first century ears. To them there is no such thing as a “good” Samaritan.

² Thanks to Debie Thomas for her sermon *Journey with Jesus*, which gave shape and content to this sermon.
<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/1023-go-and-do-likewise>

³ Levine, Amy-Jill, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*, 2014, p. 102.

A black teenager is robbed, and a Good white supremacist saves his life.

Who is the last person on earth you'd ever want to call "good" or ask to save your life? Who is someone you'd like to fix, or control, but never, *ever* need?

A transgender woman is robbed, and a Good anti-LGBTQ activist saves her life.

These days, our differences have stinging real-world consequences. We're convinced that the other is wrong. In the same way, the hatred between Jews and Samaritans in Jesus' day isn't theoretical, it's real.

An Israeli man is robbed, and a Good Hamas member saves his life.⁴

Jesus' story with a "good" Samaritan stuns listeners. He asks us to break down real barriers in our world. He asks us to see the child of God beneath the label.

In our parable there is only one character not defined by profession, class, or religion. The wounded person, dying on the road. We know nothing about him, except his need. Maybe our job is to occupy his place in the story. Maybe we have to be the broken one before we can feel the compassion and mercy of the Good Samaritan.

Soccer superstar Megan Rapinoe is robbed and President Trump saves her life.

When we're lying bloody in a ditch, all divisions of "us" and "them" disappear. In a ditch, it doesn't matter whose help we'd prefer, or whose politics we accept, or whose way of practicing Christianity we like best. What matters is whether anyone will stop and show mercy.

President Trump is robbed and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez saves his life.

There's scandal at the heart of this parable. Jesus dreams of a different kind of kingdom, with room for world-altering surprises. He calls us away from theoretical faith to put faith in action.

An Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Agency Officer is robbed and today, on this day of raids, an undocumented migrant family saves her life.

Each of us, at some season in our lives, experiences a time when we're injured and in a ditch. A job falls apart. A marriage ends. A parent dies. We give up our car keys. A diagnosis arrives. A child struggles. We're in a ditch and we need help.

When we've been kicked to the curb, what matters is how quickly we can swallow our pride and grab hold of whatever hand is offered, even if it's the hand of someone we fear or distrust.

Maybe our job is not only to reimagine those we might help, but also those who might help us, if we give them a chance. Giving and receiving are so deeply connected.

⁴ A true story about what happened when Jewish settlers were attacked and a Palestinian doctor helped. See:
<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/06/world/middleeast/west-bank-israel-palestinians-attacks.html>

A lawyer asks, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus says, “You’ll discover the answer when you face the fact that you are only sometimes a ‘saver,’ and often an ‘avoider.’ And daily – daily – you’re someone in need.” When we see things Jesus’ way, what a great gift it is that God doesn’t set or acknowledge any boundaries for the limits of love. Amen.