

## Hot Topics for a Hot Summer

# *Diversity*

July 20, 2014

### PRELUDE – O Love That Will Not Let Me Go

### Worship Songs – I Will Follow / Be Unto Your Name

### Feature – “Black & White”

Good morning everyone.

The Gospel of Luke chapter 10 verse 25 tells us that one day ...

*An expert in the law [of Moses] stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”*

*“What is written in the Law?” Jesus replied. “How do you read it?”*

*The [religious lawyer] answered, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind”; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”*

*“You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.”*

*But [the lawyer] wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”* Luke  
10:25-29 (NIV)

And the answer to that question ... well, that’s the message I want to bring to you this morning.

But before we get into it, I should first lay my cards on the table as I have done each week in this series so you can have some sense of where I’m coming from on this issue. As Nathan said, today we are talking about *diversity*: how to live as a follower of Jesus in a world that’s becoming more and more “multi”: multicultural, multiracial, multiethnic, multinational, multi-whatever.

And that scares me just a bit (which is the first card I’m laying on the table).

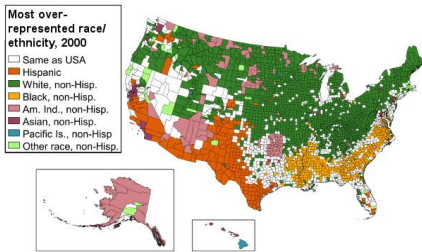
It scares me because it’s unfamiliar territory for me. I come from a white suburban evangelical Christian background and, save for a few years in my mid-20s when I lived in New Jersey, I have spent almost my entire life – over five decades – in that kind of environment. So, for me to look around and see more and more people of color, more and more people from different parts of the world whose language I don’t speak or whose god I don’t worship is a bit unsettling.

I’m not saying it’s a *bad* thing. It’s just something that’s outside of my comfort zone.

And I want you to know that up front.

And I think a lot of you can relate to that. In fact, if you grew up in this area, I'm almost *positive* you can relate to that because this region (mostly because of its location in the middle of the country) ...

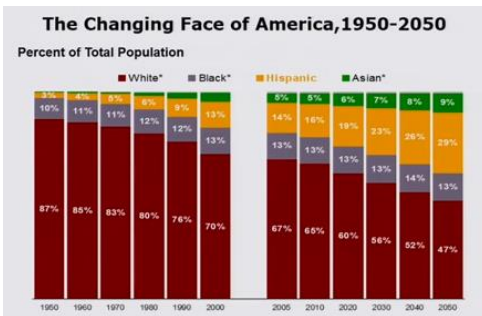
**... has been relatively insulated from the cultural, racial and ethnic diversity that has long existed on the east and west coasts, in the "Old South" and more recently in the southwest United States.**



As you can see from the map, this area of the country is and has been pretty much an Anglo-white area. Obviously, Kansas City has had a significant African-American presence over the years but in terms of overall numbers, it's been pretty small and localized. Very few minorities have lived anywhere but in the inner city.

But that's changing both here and nationwide.

**<graph> And the change is accelerating.**



This chart represents what's happened over the past 65 years and is expected to happen nationally over the next 35. Within that timeframe, those who used to be the overwhelming majority (people who look a lot like me) will represent less than half of the population.

That's a lot of change.

And change is hard for a lot of people, especially older people – like me. I don't think my kids and younger people in general have the same level of tension that I do and I'm happy about that ... but ... whenever you put cultures together, regardless of age, it's not easy. It's hard work.

Which leads to the second (and final) card I should lay on the table before we get to it ... sometimes (and maybe this is just because I'm older) when I am aware of the increasing diversity around me, I think to myself, "why bother? Why not just pretend not to notice the black families moving in around the corner? Or the Hispanics or the Muslims that I see when I stop at the convenience store? Let them keep to themselves and I'll keep to myself and everyone will be happy."

**<pic> As it turns out, my middle daughter Katie married a man from Oaxaca, Mexico so that's no longer possible. Josue Aguilar Bautista is now a part of my family.**

And I'm glad because he's a smart kid and good guy but, I'll be honest. Sometimes I feel tension when I sense the disconnect between his cultural background and mine; when I hear from him how people from other parts of the world negatively perceive "Americans" (meaning Anglos like me). That's not fun.

It would be so much easier to shut out everyone who is different from me. Why bother?

And I'm pretty sure that a lot of you feel the same way even if you do not belong to the racial or ethnic majority. No matter who you are, it's very difficult to cross racial, cultural or ethnic lines because of the inherent distrust people have for other people who are not like them ... especially when some of those "other people" have done bad things your people.

I got to hear a vivid example of this last week when I interviewed Lina Salam, a neighbor and friend of Shannon and Price Horn. Lina and her husband, Sam, are Muslims. They moved from Ohio to Kansas City not long after 9/11 – actually *because of 9/11* and the mistreatment she experienced afterwards.

I'll let her tell you the story. Let's watch.

<END SLIDE SET 1>

**Video: Lina – 911 (2.1 min)**

She went on to say that she really didn't want to move. She had a job she liked and her kids were in a good preschool. But in case something bad happened – like somebody getting killed – they felt it best to be near Sam's family who lived here.

Can you imagine that? Having to move because when people look at you they get so angry that you fear for your life – or the life of your husband and children?

I asked Lina if she had experienced that kind of treatment here in the safe and friendly Northland of Kansas City. Here's part of what she told me.

**Video: Lina – at Walmart (1.3 min)**

<BEGIN SLIDE SET 2>

Getting mistreated because someone else who is "bad and doing wrong" looks like you and has the same cultural and ethnic background as you ... it's just not fair.

And that's true whether you're in the minority or in the majority ... which brings us back to Luke chapter 10 (though it may take a while for it to become obvious as to why).

**The Good Samaritan**

Remember, the expert in Mosaic Law has just tried to test Jesus. "Yes, Jesus, we agree that the essence of all the commandments is to love God and love one's neighbor. But, who exactly is my neighbor? Who do I need to love in order

to feel like I've done what God has expected of me? Who is supposed to be on the list of people for whom I am concerned and who can I safely ignore? Who can I shut out if it's just too uncomfortable?"

And just so you'll know, this wasn't a new question. This issue had actually been debated for quite a while in Jewish theology and the rabbis prior to Jesus had split into two camps in their answer. In one camp, the conviction was that loving one's neighbor meant to be concerned about your immediate family and friends; those who were closest to you. In the other camp, the belief was that the circle of concern extended to all Jews everywhere – not just the ones you came into contact with or knew personally.<sup>i</sup>

So, what this lawyer is really asking is “Jesus, which camp are you in?” And when Luke tells us that the guy wanted to justify himself, we know that he fully expects Jesus' answer to be the same as his own and to, therefore, confirm his righteousness.

But that's not what happens. In fact, what happens – what Jesus says in response – is so shocking and is so offensive that, even today, we still don't get it. In fact, I would bet big money that 80% of the people in this room today have heard and are familiar with how Jesus answers the question. But what we've heard and what we think Jesus meant by it isn't even close.

So, let me ask you ... show of hands please ... how many of you have heard of the term “Good Samaritan”? How many of you are familiar with the story? Most everyone.

But let's listen to it again, in context. The expert in the Mosaic Law believes that he has done it right – he has completely and perfectly “loved his neighbor as he loves himself” – and he is expecting Jesus to confirm it when he asks “who is my neighbor?”

*In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho ...*

And when Jesus says “down” he literally means down.

**<road pic> There's about a 3,000 ft drop in altitude over the 20 miles between the two cities. The road twists and winds its way down ...**

... which made it conducive for ambushing travelers. And that happened so often that the road actually became known as “The Bloody Pass.”<sup>ii</sup>

And sure enough, in the story Jesus tells, that's what happens. “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho ...”

*... when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead.*

Not long after that happened, Jesus said ...

*“A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.*

*“But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey,*

*brought him to an inn and took care of him.*

*“The next day he took out two [silver coins] and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’”* Luke 10:30-35 (NIV)

### **Then Jesus asked ...**

*“Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”*

*The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.”*

*Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”* Luke 10:36-37 (NIV)

Now, what most people think this story is about is Jesus is saying that we should “be more like the Samaritan than the religious leaders. That guy did what should have been done even though it cost him and inconvenienced him. That’s what it means to be a neighbor.”

And that interpretation is so accepted and familiar that almost daily there’s a feel-good news story about a “good Samaritan” who happens to show up at just the right time and helps someone in trouble (even though most people don’t know what a Samaritan is!)

In fact, just type “good Samaritan helps” into your favorite search engine sometime and you’ll see lots of links to videos like this one.

<END SLIDE SET 2>

### **Video – Good Samaritan Helps Stranded Drivers (1.3 min)**

<BEGIN SLIDE SET 3>

Wow is right. And the guy even pulled a man out of a ditch, just like in the story Jesus told.

And, just to be clear, I’m not trying to discount this understanding of the story Jesus tells and what it says about being a neighbor.

In fact, it has been taught and preached this way by some of the best preachers in the world, including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who is often thought of primarily as a civil rights leader but was, in fact, primarily a Baptist preacher. His faith as a Christian and his understanding of the Gospel and the scripture – including this particular parable – was the motivation and justification for everything he did as leader.

To put it another way, without stories like this one and the way God used it to shape his heart, Martin Luther King, Jr. would not have been Martin Luther King, Jr. And Rev. King used this parable quite often in explaining why he felt it necessary to do certain things and ask others to join him.

In 1964, in a sermon preached at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, he said that there were “three philosophies represented by the characters in Jesus’ story. And everyone within the sound of my voice today lives by one of these three philosophies.”

**1. There's the way of the robbers. Their credo is "What is thine is mine! And if you don't give it to me, I'll take it from you."**

When King would preach this sermon, he would give examples of the robber philosophy: slavery, colonialism, street crime, even preachers' playing on people's religious desires in order to line their pockets.

**2. Then there's what he called "the way of the world." And that way is "what is mine is mine, and what is thine is thine."**

In other words, you keep to yourself and I'll keep to myself – which is kind of like what I was describing earlier in my own thinking and temptation to say "why bother?" It's a lot of trouble and maybe even a little dangerous ... which is probably what the priest and Levite were thinking.

As I said earlier, the Jericho road was well known for its dangers. Are the robbers still near? Is this a trap? Maybe the guy wasn't really wounded. Maybe he was a decoy designed to suck them in to a similar fate.

"And so the first question that the priest asked," Dr. King would say, "the first question that the Levite asked was, 'If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?'"<sup>iii</sup>

Their problem was not so much that they were evil but that they were overly cautious ... which means that they were just like a lot of us when it comes to getting involved with other people. "What's mine is mine and what's thine is thine."

**3. The third and final philosophy represented in this story is "the way of the neighbor." And that way is "what is mine is thine."**

"Whatever I have that you need, it's yours even if it puts me in danger."

The way of the neighbor doesn't ask "what will happen to *me* if I help?" It asks, "What will happen to *them* if I don't?" That was the motivation of the Good Samaritan.

It was also the motivation for Dr. King to be in Memphis, TN on the day he was shot and killed. He had gone to there to support a strike by the garbage workers, some of the people on the lowest rung of social status. But many of his supporters couldn't understand why he would go and didn't want him to go. It was dangerous. Threats had been made.

He told them that he couldn't imagine Abraham Lincoln asking "What will happen to *me* if I issue the Emancipation Proclamation and bring an end to slavery?" He asked "What will happen to *the Union and to millions of Negroes* if I do nothing?" So the question in Memphis, Dr. King said, was not "If I help the garbage workers, what will happen to *me*?" The right question is "If I do not help the garbage workers, what will happen to *them*?"

And the next day, he gave his life for their cause – and the cause of thousands of others who were living under the oppression of racism in this country.

Obviously, "the way of the neighbor" as King understood it, is a very powerful interpretation of this parable and one that any serious follower of Jesus would do well to emulate.

## A Shocking Twist

But, at this point, some of you are probably thinking, “this is all very interesting Rick, but does it really have anything to do with living as a follower of Jesus in a world that’s becoming more and more diverse?”

Absolutely it does. In fact, as strong as the interpretation we just heard is ... and as accurate as it is in describing the way of the neighbor ... that wasn’t the point Jesus was trying to make. The Jews already understood all that.

One biblical commentator puts it like this:<sup>iv</sup>

“The parable of the Good Samaritan is not a morality tale. Jesus is not telling us to be ‘good Samaritans.’

Of course that seems like the simplest reading, but the parable itself has given the word ‘Samaritan’ such positive, altruistic, mythic overtones that it has concealed from modern readers how *utterly shocking* it was to 1st-century Jewish-Palestinian ears.

“It was simply *not* shocking (or even remotely original) to be told the importance of being nice, even to enemies. Indeed, if being merciful ... was the purpose of the parable, a Jew aiding a Samaritan who fell among the thieves would have made a far more effective object lesson.

“This is not to say that the Samaritan’s actions are not admirable or worthy of emulation. They are. But to identify such an obvious conclusion as the primary purpose of the parable is to reduce the Master Teacher to a rather uninspired and uncreative preacher of run-of-the-mill, lowest-common-denominator ethics, a trader in trite, self-evident platitudes with nothing more original to say than ‘helping people who need help is the right thing to do.’”

So if that’s *not* the point – if Jesus’ listeners would have already understood that – what was the point? What would have been so shocking to everyone who first heard this parable?

Dr. Amy-Jill Levine, a Jewish scholar of the New Testament<sup>v</sup>, says that in Hebrew thinking, Jews in general are divided into three categories: Priests (who are descended from Moses’ brother Aaron), Levites (Temple workers who are descended from Levi) and common ordinary Israelites. You’ve got Priests, Levites and Israelites. That’s how they thought.

Now, let’s play a simple word-association game. This is audience participation time. You fill in the blank – and this is not a trick question!

- If I say to you, “Larry, Moe and” ... you say? “Curly.”
- If I say, “Snap, Crackle and” you say? “Pop”
- If I say, “Father, Son and” you say? “Holy Spirit”

We naturally understand and associate those sequences. So, as soon as Jesus says a priest and a Levite walk by the guy in the ditch, everyone listening assumes that the next person who comes along will be an Israelite – one of the regular people.

But that's not the story Jesus tells. He goes from Priest to Levite to ... *Samaritan* ... which, to them, was about the same as me going from Larry to Moe to Osama Bin Laden. It would have been unthinkable – and frightening.

Why? Because there was a long, long history of conflict between the Jews and the Samaritans, and the Samaritans were the enemy. So, if I'm a Jew laying in a ditch dying and I see a Samaritan coming towards me, I'm thinking "oh no, he's going to finish me off. I'm done for."

And that's not unreasonable because in the history of the conflicts, the Samaritans *have been* rapists and mass murderers of my people. "Is that what's going to happen to me?" is not a crazy initial thought.

But in Jesus story, that's *not* what happens. Instead of rape or murder, the Samaritan acts in a way that's more in line with the greatest commandment in all of God's laws (to love your neighbor as yourself) than two Jewish religious leaders. Wow!

**And that's the point (and the shock) of the story: that there *actually could be* ... a good Samaritan.**

And now, I think, I hope, that you can see what this has to do with diversity; living in a multicultural world where there's a whole bunch of "them" – people who come from groups that are not like us; groups that have done "our people" wrong in the past.

If Jesus was telling this story today, I think he would put it in a way that hammered home the point to whoever needed to hear it that there might actually be a good African-American. There might actually be a good Latino. There might actually be a good Muslim. There might actually be a good white male or two in the bunch.

And this might get me in trouble for saying it but there might even be some good LGBT folks out there. And this might even get me fired – but there might even be some good Democrats and Republicans.

And it might be that the black, brown, red, yellow or white person that's looking you in the face on the bus or at work or at school wants to treat you not as an enemy but in "the way of the neighbor."

*Those people really are there.*

When I interviewed Lina, I asked her "what one thing would you like say to a group of non-Muslims?" like you and me. Here's what she said.

<END SLIDE SET 3>

**Video: Lina – What Would You Say (0.9 min)**

<BEGIN SLIDE SET 4>

I thought it was interesting that three times she said, "I'm human" or "we're human."

And that's where we have to go – all of us – mentally and emotionally if we're going to live in a world that's increasingly diverse. We have to stop seeing people as objects Instead of thinking of people primarily as Muslims or Blacks or Whites or Hispanics or whatever, we need to see them as humans; all with the potential of being our neighbor.



## Conclusion

But that's so hard. In fact, let's look again at the end of the story. While everyone is still in shock and awe at that unexpected twist, Jesus says to the lawyer, "so, you have these two pastors and a Samaritan."

*"Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"*

The answer couldn't be more obvious could it? But look closely at how the lawyer responds.

*The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him."*

Who's that? It's the Samaritan, of course!

*He can't even say the word "Samaritan" because he is closed to the idea that a person from Samaria could be anything other than an enemy. He is closed to the idea that someone from Samaria might actually be acting in ways that are more consistent with his own faith than he is – that someone from Samaria might actually be "good." And he is closed to those ideas simply because that guy is "one of them."*

-----  
Now, that doesn't mean that he can't someday be open; that someday God will change his heart; that even right after this experience, he didn't repent and say, "wow, I am wrong on this." It does mean, however – and this takes us all the way back to the beginning of his conversation with Jesus. Remember how that went?

"What do I need to do to inherit eternal life? Love God and love my neighbor? I do that already, and perfectly I might add."

But he didn't do it perfectly. When presented with a story in which one of "them" was the good guy, he couldn't even *imagine* what it would be like to be a neighbor to him, let alone actually *do it* if the opportunity presented itself. And, that was evidence that he really did not deserve to "inherit eternal life." It was evidence that he was just like the rest of us – a flawed human being in need of salvation from God.

Fortunately for him and for us, God offers that salvation freely in Jesus. That same Jesus who told the shocking story, a few months later took a shocking step and gave up his life on a Roman cross as the instrument of justice that needed to be satisfied for the sin and destruction humans have wrought (often through their prejudices).

### **As the angel in John's vision of Heaven proclaimed:**

*"With your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth."  
Revelation 5:8-9 (NIV)*

Notice that? Every tribe and language and people and nation. The Kingdom of God on Earth is going to be a "multi" experience: every tribe, language, people, and nation.

And everyone who gets in, gets in the same way. There is no prejudice with God. We are totally accepted by God

through faith no matter who we are or what we have done.

### **As Paul wrote**

*In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.*

### **And because of that, he says ...**

*There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. Galatians 3:26-28 (NIV)*

There are only people; people who have said yes to the unconditional love of God in Jesus.

Let's pray.

<PRAYER>

### **Feature – Unconditionally (Katy Perry)**

### **CLOSING COMMENTS**

### **Video – “Life Connection Thanks”**

Endnotes

---

<sup>i</sup> <http://www.matthewnederlanden.com/bible-commentary/parable-good-samaritan-luke-10.php>

<sup>ii</sup> <http://citycalledheaven.blogspot.com/2010/07/martin-luther-king-and-good-samaritan.html>

<sup>iii</sup> King, April 3, 1968

<sup>iv</sup> This is an RLDS site but the writer is totally on the mark in his exegesis. <http://bycommonconsent.com/2008/05/20/the-parable-of-jesus-part-1-the-good-samaritan/>

<sup>v</sup> Much of this next section is from Dr. Amy-Jill Levine, Dangers on the Road to Jericho, audio recording