

Are You One?
July 18, 2010
Luke 10:25-37

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" {26} He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" {27} He answered, "You shall 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 your neighbor as yourself." {28} And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." {29} But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" {30} Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. {31} Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. {32} So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. {33} But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. {34} He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. {35} The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' {36} Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" {37} He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

The story of the good Samaritan has got to be one of the greatest stories found in the Bible, but in many ways it may also be one of the most misunderstood.

What always fascinates me about this story is the title that we have given it.

The GOOD SAMARITAN

Seems like an appropriate title when you read the story, the Samaritan is obviously a good guy. He does what the Priest and Levite refused to do → goes out of his way and help a stranger.

But in the context in which this story is told, the use of a Samaritan as the good guy is shocking.

The Priest and the Levite might be translated in our common lingo to be a pastor and denominational leader. These were men whom the hearers of the story would have had respect and trust for. They would have EXPECTED them to stop and help the stranger.

But they don't!

The man who stops, we are told is a Samaritan.
And how would we understand this person in today's age. ???
 Maybe as a Muslim, better yet a non-English speaking Muslim
 A foreigner, someone we should not trust
 Someone we would not expect to stop and help

In other words --- there was no such thing as a "good" Samaritan.

But that is not the focus that I want to zero in on today.

What I want to do is turn this story on it's head and ask the question:
 Can we be a semi-good Samaritan?
 Is that enough?

I posed this question on Facebook this past week and the responses were insightful.

The thing that stuck me is how good we are at rationalizing our behavior.

A few said there is no such thing as a sort of or semi-good Samaritan, but by far the majority lifted up the desire to be good, but the reality of falling short, and suggesting that is better than nothing.

But let me try to illustrate this in another way.

Anyone ever lost their cell phone?

I don't know about you, but my cell phone contains a great deal of my life!

Think about all the phone numbers, contact information, pictures, appointments and text messages you have stored there.

Now I understand, if you back it up often on your computer or with your wireless carrier, it shouldn't be a big deal.

But come on – most of us are too busy to make a backup plan and too cheap to buy the phone insurance.

Losing your phone can be a tragic event!

Ashton Giese knows this.

He was on his way home when he inadvertently dropped his cell phone on a Washington, D.C., street.

When he discovered that his it was missing, he frantically began dialing the cell's number from another phone.

Finally, a voice answered. "Yeah, I got your phone," said the voice. "But what's it worth to you?"

What's it worth to you?

That's certainly not the first thing you want to hear out of a "good" Samaritan.

Many of us assume there's a kind of unwritten agreement between losers and finders.

When we're on the finding end we get a special kind of rush when we're able to unite someone with their lost valuables. The gushing gratitude of the recipient is enough reward for most of us.

But, clearly, not all of us.

Some people look at the misfortune of others as an opportunity to make a quick buck. I think that you might even call them "bad Samaritans."

Bad Samaritans are focused primarily on maximizing their reward or, in some sense, recouping something of what they believe society owes them.

Andrew Cohn, was cleaning up after a backyard party and found a wallet on the ground with \$40 in it.

"I'd just spent \$500 on the party, I figured the money was the girl's contribution."

He kept the money and left the wallet, with ID and credit cards, on the ground.

How in the world could he justify his actions?

His answer was quite simple:

"If you expect someone's going to return your wallet with all the cash, you're probably a little delusional."

Davy Rothbart, who edits a magazine called *Found*, which features photos of lost objects, agrees with Cohn.

"Really good Samaritans, if they find a wallet, they return it intact. . . Some people find a wallet, take the money, but return the important stuff. That's not evil."

Does that make Cohn a semi-good Samaritan?

And what if you find a wallet but really need the money right *now*; does that make it okay to keep it as long as you give back the “important” stuff?
Is “finders-keepers” an ethical escape clause?

I have to admit that I hope that all of you who are sitting here this morning would say “NO” to that.

We all know from the Ten Commandments that THOU SHALL NOT STEAL.

And from Deuteronomy 22:1-4 (The Message)

If you see your kinsman's ox or sheep wandering off loose, don't look the other way as if you didn't see it. Return it promptly. If your fellow Israelite is not close by or you don't know whose it is, take the animal home with you and take care of it until your fellow asks about it. Then return it to him. Do the same if it's his donkey or a piece of clothing or anything else your fellow Israelite loses. Don't look the other way as if you didn't see it.

If you see your fellow's donkey or ox injured along the road, don't look the other way. Help him get it up and on its way.

We have been taught that when you find something that is not yours, that you take it back to the rightful owner. WITHOUT expectation of a reward. And that certainly was what most people who responded to me on Facebook suggested.

Demanding a reward from a vulnerable person is nothing short of extortion.

But is that **all** that Jesus is trying to teach us?

When we read this passage a little more closely, we begin to see that the story has an even deeper dimension to it than just the ethics of helping.

It really has to do with how we view people and,
more specifically, whether we believe in the kindness of strangers.

I have read that how you perceive strangers gives great insight into how you perceive the world.

Let me try to explain.

If you believe that most people are intrinsically unethical and that they'd put the screws to you if given a chance, then you're much more likely to put the screws to someone else if, say, you find a wallet or a cell phone or, as in Jesus' story, if you find him or her battered on the side of the road.

People who see strangers as outsiders, as enemies or as something less than themselves will default to treating them that way, rather than as equals, or, to use Jesus' term, as "neighbors."

Do you remember how this parable begins?

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Fascinating question when we know Jesus answer.

The lawyer's question is about ultimate rewards.

Now you have to remember what a first century Jew meant when they asked about "eternal life".

When we hear that word, we think of living forever, immortality – but not so with a 1st century Jew.

For a Jew living at the time of Jesus, they understood that word very differently.

For a first-century Jew, "eternal life" meant the life of the age to come, the ultimate covenant blessing that was in store for God's chosen people. A very earthy and timely understanding.

The lawyer perceived himself to be a member of the covenant community who, like many of his people at the time, held clear ideas about who was within the covenant boundaries set by the Torah and who was outside — in other words --- who were friends and who were strangers.

Jesus response is initially pretty simple -> he asks him what is written in the Torah (the Law) what we understand as the first 5 books of Moses.

The lawyer knew the right answer!

He answers with those famous words from the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:5) and a piece from Leviticus.

"You shall 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 your neighbor as yourself."

"EXACTLY", Jesus says! "NOW GO AND DO IT!"

But that is the problem --- isn't it.

WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?

The definition of *neighbor* is the sticking point for this lawyer, so he presses Jesus for a legal opinion.

Asking Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" was like saying, "You're talking about our own people, right?"

Like many of the people of Jesus' day, the lawyer apparently had big issues with strangers.

He, like many of his fellow 1st Century Jews would have defined neighbor something like this:

"My neighbor is a fellow Jew, i.e., someone who lives within the covenant boundaries of Judaism."

Not all that different from most of us

I don't know about you, but I was struck by "The Decision" that aired on ESPN a little over a week ago.

Just in case you missed it; "The Decision" was a show all about LeBron James announcing his decision on where he intended to play basketball next year.

I had vowed I wasn't going to tune in, but as 8:30pm rolled around, my TV somehow ended up on ESPN, checking to see if he had made his decision.

As I listened to the talking heads discuss LeBron's decision, I was struck by the tone that it took.

The show was nothing more than an hour long foray into narcissism. The commentators all tossed rather simple and silly questions to LeBron which gave him the opportunity to tell us over and over again that his decision is all about his "happiness" and his desire to win an NBA championship.

LeBron reminds us all, just how focused we are on our own self-centeredness.

The most striking comment I have heard was that the whole show was like throwing a party and telling your spouse that you are divorcing them and moving on to a new person.

Not only did it show no class, but it also was a terrible role model.

M. Cooper Harriss made these comments in *Sightings*:

What, finally, does the LeBron James decision say about our present cultural occasion? It reveals idolatry, . . . in how we find distraction in less-than-ultimate concerns and delude ourselves into believing that the idol is without fracture;

that money, agility, and fame matter more in the grander scheme of justice than compassion, humanity, and love

Bishop Coyner in his weekly email may have put it best:

We also can learn from his example. We can learn that his decision is really not the decision. What is "the decision"? I believe that "the decision" is actually a whole series of hundreds and thousands of little choices we make about how to live our lives. **Will we live our lives primarily for ourselves, our happiness, our goals, our results, our own choices, and our own ego? Or, will we live our lives with a focus upon a higher purpose, service to others, making a difference in the world, leaving a legacy for those to follow, and offering our best and highest for a cause that is worthy?** It is a simple but profound choice we make many times a day. It is "the decision" that directs our lives.

How we view our neighbor --- the people around us, is our decision that deeply affects how we view the world.

But just who is my neighbor?

That is such a powerful question.

But Jesus answer to that question is so familiar to us, we almost miss the scandal of it!

A man is on his way down the wilderness road from Jerusalem to Jericho, which implies that he is a Jew, when he gets set upon by robbers who beat him and leave him for dead. A priest and a Levite, who should be obvious "neighbors" to their fellow Jew, both pass by on the road and refuse to help. Maybe they had good reasons; for example, their involvement with a battered body might make them ritually unclean to work in the temple. Although Jesus doesn't elaborate on their reasons for not wanting to get involved, the fact that these two are representatives of the Torah and its covenant rituals and boundaries is very significant. The priest and the Levite — and, by association, the Torah and the sacrificial system — fail to act in order to save one of their own.

Who does?

A Samaritan, a stranger and an enemy of Israel.

To most first-century Jews, "good Samaritan" would have been a laughable oxymoron, as these half-breed people with their own temple were considered pariahs.

However, this Samaritan stops, renders aid and takes care of the Jewish victim's expenses. He does what the victim's "own people" won't do for him.

Jesus hammers home the point from the perspective of the victim in answering the lawyer's question with a question of his own.

"Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers" (v. 36)?

The stunning answer was, of course, that the Jew in the ditch discovered *that the Samaritan was his neighbor and that the others — those geographically, ethnically and religiously similar — were not.*

"What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

For starters, we must redefine our definition of "neighbor" to include the stranger and the outsider.

Jesus would live that out by spending time with the outcasts and, interestingly, the tax collectors who made their living essentially by extortion!

Following Jesus means we are called to "go and do likewise" (v. 37). We are called to see others not as good or bad Samaritans but as people who deserve our presence and our help.

God's people are never to play "finders-keepers," nor are they to see themselves as being more deserving or better than anyone else.

When it comes to the kindness of strangers, we tend to get what we expect.

If we're kind and helpful to people we don't know or who are in trouble, in every circumstance, then we're more likely to see that kindness returned. Even if we don't receive reciprocal care and help, we know that God has called us to love the stranger regardless.

That's what it means to be God's people.