

Deuteronomy 30:9-14; Psalm 25:1-10; Colossians 1:1-14; Luke 10:25-37

“Go and do likewise”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

I feel safe in saying, we have all, at some point in our lives, been helped by the selfless and compassionate love of a Good Samaritan. Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan highlights what compassionate love looks like: it is merciful, forgiving, welcoming, and just. Such love is not an ideology, rather, love for a neighbor in need is the ethical center of the Hebrew scriptures and the prophets. Merciful and compassionate love is the very center of our faith.

The parable of the Good Samaritan was occasioned by a lawyer, an expert in the Mosaic law who stood up to test Jesus, and their conversation turns on this ethical center of the Hebrew scriptures: love of God and love for one’s neighbor.

Testing Jesus, the lawyer asked, “*What must I do to receive eternal life?*” Jesus asked him, “*What is written in the law?*” and the lawyer’s answer combined Deuteronomy 6:4, known as the *Shema* about loving God with all one’s being, and Leviticus 19:18 about loving your neighbor as yourself. Jesus replied to him, “*You have given the right answer; do this and you will live.*”

Now if the lawyer had stopped there this conversation also might have ended, but he again asked Jesus, “*And who is my neighbor?*” This question is not an abstract one; the lawyer is seeking to know the limits of his love for his neighbor. We might imagine someone seeking to do the bare minimum to gain eternal life.

At the end of the parable, however, notice how Jesus turns the meaning of “neighbor” from being an object – someone who helps me to gain eternal life; to instead, ask, “*Who was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?*”

This parable turns on Jesus’ defining a neighbor as someone who comes to the aid of another in need. For Jesus, the question about loving God is always answered by being loving to others.

What is fascinating in this story is that the lawyer was a legal scholar; he knew the content of the law, and yet he sought to use the law for his own benefit. When Jesus asked him, “*Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor?*” His reply, “*The one who showed him mercy*” was telling, because it seems he could not bear to say the word “Samaritan.”

For the lawyer, perhaps the idea of a “Good Samaritan” was a contradiction in terms. In Jesus’ day, centuries of mutual hostility between Jewish and Samaritan peoples had perhaps made it hard for the lawyer to see the Samaritan as an agent of God’s love.

In the parable, there are three characters who see a man left for dead on the roadside: the priest, the Levite, and the Samaritan. Like the priest and the Levite, the lawyer who tested Jesus was

someone very concerned about obeying the law and remaining ritually pure. The man by the roadside appeared to be dead. To have touched or encountered a dead man would have made each of them ritually unclean. Their concern wasn't out of love for someone else; rather, their concern was for their own religious purity.

In contrast, the Good Samaritan is an example of what love for God and neighbor looks like. Love is not an abstract code or rule designed to be used as a reward; rather, love is God's active concern for my neighbor at work in and through me. Jesus makes mercy and compassion *the* ethical imperative at the center of discipleship to God.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is the social conscience of the good news of Jesus Christ. The trouble is that like the priest, Levite, and lawyer, we too can be preoccupied with the purity of our own theology – making it difficult to see Jesus in our neighbor.

The open question of being a good neighbor – a Good Samaritan – continues to reverberate today. We know this story so well that we may not ask ourselves, “Who are those people today that I might struggle to help? What are those things that limit the scope of God's love active in me? This story isn't just about a road from Jerusalem to Jericho; it is about every road in this world. This story continues to reverberate in our city and nation, and across the world because we live in a world increasingly marked by neglect, self-centeredness, and open violence against people who are weak, vulnerable and different.

Like the legalistic priest and the Levite who were unable to act with mercy to others, we are also becoming unable to act with mercy for others. Increasingly we have forgotten that the road leading to eternal life is a road and a way of being, a way of being merciful and generous to others. Around the world and across the street we see our human hardness of heart played out as people in need are stripped of their rights, silenced, beaten to the ground, or left for dead.

On the streets of our own city, we see neighbors wounded by life, in need at intersections and living under overpasses. On the streets of our nation, we see the hungry and homeless, and we see people of different nationalities, ethnicities, and gender identities ignored, passed by, and even erased. Across the world, daily we are becoming numb to scenes of people on roads – displaced by war, injured by bombing, and dying from starvation.

I speak of these things on a quiet Sunday morning in the beauty of this sacred space precisely because this is what Jesus wants us to think about. Jesus is seeking to make us confront something significant about ourselves: we live in a world of robbers who prey upon the weak, reject the vulnerable, invade their neighbor's land, leaving them for dead along the roads of this world.

At times I wonder if we are forgetting the basic principles of the Good Samaritan. We are becoming profoundly inward-looking and selfish, yet the Good Samaritan reveals someone who is

outwardly generous and compassionate to those in need. Jesus chose a foreigner, a Samaritan, to be the one who reveals God's love, reminding us that when we exclude those who are foreign or seen as "outsiders," we also risk excluding the God who works miracles through the people of all nations, ethnicities, and identities. Anyone can be a Good Samaritan.

Very soon after Mari and I were married, we were sent to southern Japan to serve a two-point parish. We were both big city kids raised in Tokyo and Chicago, and we were sent to a town and country region that was very traditional and largely Buddhist – we could even see rice fields from our home. We rented a house in between the two churches and the day we moved in the doorbell rang. Mrs. Fukuda our next-door neighbor stood before us with a large bag full of vegetables from her garden. She said that very likely we didn't have anything in our refrigerator and wanted to welcome us to the neighborhood. Her welcome blossomed into friendship with her and her husband and their extended family, essentially adopting us into their wider family for the time we lived there. I was a foreigner and stranger; we were not Buddhist, but we were welcomed as friends in need.

The story of the Good Samaritan reminds us that being a good neighbor is selfless and compassionate. It has the power to heal wounds and to create new friendships. In the parable, the Samaritan did not count the cost of helping his neighbor. He used his material possessions to help because it was the right thing to do. The Samaritan was selfless, merciful, compassionate, and just. He did not seek praise or profit but only the well-being of his neighbor in need.

This parable describes the ethical center of our faith. Jesus redefined the word "neighbor" to mean someone *who is a good neighbor* to others. Jesus' words, "*Go and do likewise*," urge us to help, stand up for, and speak out with all people who are ignored, treated as invisible, passed by, or rejected along the road of life.

"*Go and do likewise*" is a challenge for the wealthiest nation on the planet to be a Good Samaritan – a good neighbor – to its own people, to the foreigner, and to other nations. We forget at our own peril we are to use our resources not simply to profit for ourselves but to the profit of others, to welcome others, to lift others up, healing them of the wounds inflicted upon them by the very real robbers of this world. In seeking only our own profit and only to save ourselves, we risk losing the inheritance of eternal life.

One day, Jesus will ask each of us what kind of neighbors we were to others in need. I have a feeling Jesus will not ask what church you belonged to, or how pure your theology was, but I am certain he will ask: "Did you go and do likewise?" Amen.