

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word
July 11, 2010

First Presbyterian Church
Clarksburg, WV

Rev. John F. Koerner

Luke 10:25-37

Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers? . . . “Go and do likewise.” (Luke 10:36-37 N.R.S.V.)

The Good Samaritan

I am a child of God. I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and my Savior. And I believe he has the power to change my life.

A Sunday School teacher was telling her class the story of the Good Samaritan. She explained about how this traveler was set upon by a bunch of robbers. How the robbers not only took his money but they beat him up and left him bleeding by the side to the road. “Now,” she asked her class, “What would you do if you came upon a body lying bleeding beside the road?”

One little girl replied, “I’d probably throw up.”

Well there was an honest answer, and a surprising one too.

Many of us have grown up hearing the story of the Good Samaritan. It is a particularly challenging passage for a preacher to preach on. How could I possibly say anything new on this text? How can I come up with anything that hasn’t already been said a million times before?

And yet, that is the wonder of Scripture and of the parables of Jesus. We preachers don’t have to come up with something new. The story is powerful enough by itself. Even though we have heard it hundreds of times, and it still has the power to surprise us, to provoke an honest response from us, to draw us nearer to God.

This isn’t just a story about something that happened long ago and far away. It is a story about you and me. The question is posed, “When you see someone in need, what will you do?”

Our modern newspapers are still full of stories of Good Samaritans, and also Bad Samaritans too. I read a story once about a professional football player, a wide receiver who was out walking one night when he heard screams. He ran to investigate and found a house on fire with a woman holding a baby leaning out the second story window. The flames roared and the woman screamed, “somebody catch my baby.”

The football player quickly ran forward and held out his arms. She dropped the baby to him and he caught it safely in his big, sure hands. The woman then jumped herself and escaped with only minor injuries.

Later the football player was interviewed by the press. They asked him if he had thought about the fact that while he was standing under the window, the burning house could have collapsed and killed him? He said, “No, I never thought about that. All I could see was the baby.” Then he added, “I have caught a lot of touchdown passes in my life, but none ever came close to the feeling of seeing that baby safe in my hands.”

That guy was a hero, a Good Samaritan. But we read other stories in the news also. There was a story out of Dayton, Ohio. A woman lost control of her car and drove it into the Miami River. A crowd of people watched as she climbed out onto the top of the car. She screamed that she couldn't swim, and would somebody help. Everyone stood there waiting for someone else to do something, and the woman drowned. We might say those were Bad Samaritans.

What would you do? The answer to that depends a lot on your attitude. I invite you to look with me at the three main attitudes listed in the original story of the Good Samaritan.

The first attitude is that displayed by the lawyer. The lawyers in those days were experts in theology. We might think of him as a Sunday School teacher or better yet, a Seminary Professor. This professor inquires of Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Jesus then asks him, “What is written in the Law of Moses?” And the professor replies, “‘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.’”

Jesus said, “You have answered correctly. Do this and you shall live.”

Now notice what comes next. The professor, “seeking to justify himself” asks “who is my neighbor?” That is a most interesting little phrase, “seeking to justify himself.” This man is rightly afraid that he will not be able to perfectly keep the law and so justify himself. So what he is really asking for here is limits. “Who is my neighbor? How far must I go?”

The professor was probably hoping that Jesus would say, “Those who live close to you, or maybe even “Those in your home town,” or worst case scenario, “All Jews.” Never in a million years would this seminary professor type have thought that “neighbor” would include the despised Samaritans. Jesus replies as he does every time, “There is no limit on love.”

It is the same reply that Jesus gave to Peter when he asked, “Lord how many times must I forgive? Seven times?” The standard Jewish answer was that one had to forgive three times, but no more. So Peter thought he was being generous, he doubled that and added one for good measure. “Seven times?”

But Jesus replies not seven times, but seven times seventy times. In other words, there is no limit on love.

How many times do we ask that question in all its various forms? We want to know how much money should I give to God's work at the church? What I can afford? 5%? Surely not more than 10%! We want to know how much we have to give in order to feel worthy, in order to be justified. On the one hand Jesus answers that one with, “you are already justified, you are already worthy

because of my sacrifice for you.” And then he comes back with that topper, “But if you are talking about love? There is no limit on love.”

When God brings some need to our attention, we are to respond, not according to some set formula, but according to the love that God places in our hearts. And there are times when God will ask for the shirt right off our backs. Love without limits!

The first attitude is a failing attitude, it is an attitude of limits. That failing attitude makes excuses, I don't need to help because she is not like me. He is from a different country. She has a difficult personality. I'm mad at him.

The second attitude is displayed by the priest and the Levite, it too is a failing attitude. We might think of these people as the elder and the preacher. These are good church people. Surely they will respond correctly. But both ignore the bleeding man in the road.

These are not bad people, they are very good people. They are also very busy people. They have their own very important schedules to keep- mustn't be late. And the man in the road, “Not my problem.”

This “not my problem” attitude is all too common in our modern world. Air Force Major Odie Butler was on his way to work at the Pentagon one morning driving down I-395. It was rush hour. There had been a terrible accident and a driver lay seriously injured by the roadside. The major stopped to help.

This was in the day before cell phones were so popular. The Major tried to get someone to call for help, but the other drivers screamed at him, honked their horns and made obscene gestures. They were upset that the wreck was slowing down their morning commute. Finally a computer specialist named, Larry Meade stopped and then called for an ambulance.

I'm sure that there were many conscientious people who passed by that scene. But they all assumed that someone else would help. “Not my problem.” “I might get my clothes soiled.” “I can't be late for work.” We all have a thousand excuses.

Someone might say that part of the problem is that when people get caught up in their day and their agenda, they just aren't thinking of God's commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself.” But even that isn't really true.

In the 70's there was a famous experiment conducted on the campus of Princeton Seminary. The preaching professor had told his students that they were to come the next day prepared to give a sermon on the story of the Good Samaritan. He gave them all time slots on when they were to be at the chapel to preach their sermon. They were told that this sermon would count heavily toward their final grade.

The professor then hired an actor to stand in front of the chapel entrance and to pretend, as the students were arriving, to have a heart attack. The actor did a marvelous job. He groaned, cried out, clutched his chest, even fell to the ground. And the overwhelming majority of the seminary students, these men and women who were studying to be future pastors, walked on by. They did not stop.

Even though they were studying and preaching on the Good Samaritan, they still did not stop.

There were a few students who did stop to help the sick man. And here is where it gets really interesting to me. The number one predictor on whether a certain student would stop or not was whether they believed themselves to be early or late for their preaching engagement. Not all of the ones who were early stopped, but none of the ones that were late paused.

It makes me wonder how often we allow ourselves to become too busy to be loving.

The first attitude is a failing attitude- “How much do I have to do? What are the limits? Who is my neighbor?”

The second attitude is also a failing attitude- “Not my problem. Surely someone else who is better trained, has more time, or nothing important to do- surely someone else will take care of this. Not my problem.”

The third attitude is the winning attitude in Jesus’ book. There is an element not just of surprise here but also of challenge. We are so used to hearing the word “good” with the word “Samaritan” that we tend to assume they were always used together. But the Jews of Bible days hated the Samaritans, they would not have had one good word to say about any Samaritan. In fact, they might well have said that, “The only good Samaritan is a dead Samaritan.”

So it must have come as a tremendous shock to Jesus’ audience the day he told this story. The hated Samaritan not only stops, he also binds up the man’s wounds, he also puts him on his own animal and walks all the many weary miles to the next inn. Then he goes even further and pays for the man to stay in the inn and to be taken care, this hated Samaritan even offers to stop by on his next trip through and pay any extra charges that the sick man may run up in his absence. Wow!

There is a challenge here, if this Samaritan can do this, why not you?

It would be like one of us standing on the streets of India and seeing there a poor family in desperate need. While we are debating with ourselves whether to give them a dollar or two, along comes a poor woman with thread bare clothing and no shoes. She pauses by the starving family and hands them a \$20 bill. Wouldn’t we feel humbled?

The story of the Good Samaritan still poses its question for us. When God shows you a person in need of help, mercy, and love- what will you do? Will you ask about limits? Will you make excuses, “Not my problem?” Or will you respond from a glad and generous heart?

Remember that all that you own is not really yours, it is only on loan. You will not be able to take it with you when you die. Why not use it to brighten someone’s life here and now while you can?

“Which one of these three, do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers? . . . Go and do likewise.”

Amen.

