

“Who is my neighbor?”

Luke 10: 25-37

Rev. Ed Hoekstra.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is probably the best known parable Jesus taught. Sonia, our Kidz' zone leader is also teaching the Good Samaritan to the children attending the class downstairs. The parable is so appropriate at the time of Lent because it speaks about the focus of the Gospel of Jesus Christ – to love God and to love your neighbor. Jesus told this parable in such a way that even two thousand years later, the heart of its message is timeless and relevant as it was in Jesus lifetime.

**The Royal Law:** In the book of James, chapter 2: 8 the scripture says this: *“You do well if you really fulfill the Royal Law according to the scripture, You shall love your neighbour as yourself.”*

When James said it was the Royal Law, he did not mean that it was just meant for kings and queens. James meant that the command came straight from the heart of Christ our King. In other words, it was meant to be practiced seriously by those who call themselves followers and disciples of Jesus Christ.

**Who are these Samaritans?** The Samaritans were hated because they were half breeds. They were half Jew and half Gentile (non-Jew). When the northern Kingdom was taken captive by the Assyrians, the Jews intermarried with them and settled in the land in the north call Samaria. As is common, they adopted the false, pagan gods, and they fell into idolatry. In the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, the Jews come back to Jerusalem to try and rebuild the temple. The problem was the Samaritans poured pig blood into the temple area to make the temple unclean so the building project would have to stop in order that the temple could be cleaned up again. The Jews found this detestable because it polluted what they thought to be the Holy place. The Samaritans wanted to discourage and cause harm to the faith of the Jews. It has been said that the Samaritans were hated even more than the Roman conquerors. The Jews would not walk through Samaria, but take the long way around because they believed Samaritans were unclean people. The Samaritans were hated by the Jews, and the Jews were hated by the Samaritans because how the Jews treated them. Jesus intentionally used the Samaritan in this parable. To depict the Samaritan as the ‘one who had compassion’ would have seemed totally unlikely for those listening because of the Samaritans negative reputation among the Jews. The parable would have been totally surprised, but at the same time presenting new possibilities for the hearers. The message would have also challenged the status quo, angering the religious elite.

**The Lawyer justifies himself.** At the start of the parable (verse 25), a lawyer who was expert in the law of God asked a question of Jesus: What must I do to inherit eternal life? Jesus asked the lawyer what it said in the law. Jesus cleverly prompted the lawyer to answer his own question! The lawyer wanted to justify himself or find a loophole where he could get out of helping. The lawyer asked the question: and who is my neighbour? This question is Key to living the Christian life. Furthermore, in this parable, the command of Jesus in the Gospels to love our enemies is made clear.

**The Priest, the Levite and You!** Who do you identify with in the parable? The priest of all people should know better and help the poor traveler who was suffering (the traveler is not named, but he would be a Jew since he travelled from Jerusalem). The priest represented the religious acting people. They talked the talk, but rarely did they walk the talk. The priest went out of his way to avoid the injured man, because as a Jewish priest, he could not render himself unclean by associating with someone who may have blood on them. If he did, the priest would have to take the time to go through the ritual washing again. The priest not only went around the man, he crossed over to the other side. He wanted nothing to do with the injured man.

The Levite did the same thing and pass over on the other side of the road. The Levite was an expert in the law, so he would do all he could to justify not helping the man. The law can be manipulated to suit our needs. The problem with the Levite is that he lacked compassion.

If the third traveler was a Jew and helped a fellow Jew in the ditch, the lesson would have been helpful, but would not give inspiration to reach out beyond one's own kind. With the Samaritan being the third traveler whom had compassion for the Jew in the ditch, Jesus intentionally brings home the message of loving not only the neighbours who are like us, but also the neighbours who are different and even those we consider to be our enemies!

**What is the business of the church?** I sometimes joke with people who apologize that they could not make a meeting, or they forgot to do something. I tell them not to worry because the church is in the 'forgiveness business'. And that is true since we are all forgiven by God through Jesus suffering, death and resurrection – certainly, since we are forgiven, we are not to hold grudges and harbor resentment to others (the Samaritans in our lives?). Jesus would want us to see beyond our differences, and be dispensers of forgiveness and grace. We are in the business of building bridges with others and thus advancing God's Kingdom of love.

The professor and author, Howard Snyder wrote in his book, "Liberating the Church (first published: 1983)" that *'the church gets in trouble whenever it thinks it is in the church business rather than the Kingdom business. Church people think about how to get people into the church; Kingdom people think about how to get the church into the world. Church people worry that the world might change the church. Kingdom people work to see the church change the world. When Christians put the church ahead of the Kingdom, they settle for the status quo and their own kind of people. When they catch a vision of the Kingdom of God, their sight shifts to the poor, the orphan, the widow and the refugee; "the wretched of the earth," and to God's future. They see the life and work of the church from the perspective of the Kingdom. If the church has one great need, it is this: to be set free for the Kingdom of God, to be liberated from itself as it has become, in order to be itself as God intends. The church must be free to participate fully in the economy of God.'*

The church of Jesus Christ is vital as an instrument or vehicle for the Kingdom of God. Each of us are called to support it, but not as a purpose unto itself. It is important that this fact is continually in front of us.

**Go and do likewise.** When my children were small they would play church, and my son Luke would pose as the preacher. He would start off with thanksgiving to God. He would say something like, "God is so great, he made heaven and earth. We thank you God for everything...." This would go on for a little while, and the final line would invariably be, "Go and do likewise".

Luke lifted this line from the Parable of the Good Samaritan! OK, then how can we practice the parable of the Good Samaritan in our daily lives? One of our congregants shared with me that when he is asked by people on the street for money, he is hesitant to give them money for fear that the cash will go to feeding an addiction. One day he went to the Tim Hortons to buy himself a coffee and noticed the gift cards sitting beside the cash register. He decided right there to buy three gift cards and put \$10.00 on each one. The next time he is faced with someone who is looking for some cash, he will give them a gift card knowing that they will be able to buy themselves a decent meal. In this small way, he was prepared as an agent for advancing God's Kingdom in his daily life.

Are you prepared to help the traveler on the road of life? Are you welcoming your neighbours to our church home and to our worship services? Who is your neighbour? Amen.