

Summer of Parables: The Good Samaritan

Luke 10:25-37

Rev. Dr. Tim Archibald

We love to categorize, organize, apply labels and fit everything into its place. In biology we learn the genus and species for every living thing. We make labels to tell us connections of who's related to whom—and who's not! It's a bit like that old Nova Scotia question: "So who's your father?" In Cape Breton they would build the answer right into your name. Ask Barbara McLeod who she is in North River, Cape Breton and she would be likely to answer: I'm Barbara John Angus Johnny Peggy. And people would know exactly where she fit.

When I lived on Prince Edward Island the questions were, "What's your name?" and "Where are you from?" If you said, "I'm a MacDonald from O'Leary." Someone might say: I'm related to the MacDonald's from Up West on my mother's side- 4th cousins." In other words, we're connected. But when I would answer "Archibald" I'd hear, "That's not an Island name."

Categories and labels have their place; but used in relationships they put boundaries on our love and our acceptance; they allow us to treat some people like friends, while completely ignoring others—and even hating some. We use labels like Protestant/Catholic, French/English, Tutsi/Hutu, Black/White, Muslim/Christian, Insider/Outsider, friend/enemy. And once we get a label on someone, we seem to have a very hard time revising those labels. And there's not one of us that doesn't know what that feels like. It happens in families, in workplaces, community groups and churches; and it's divisive and destructive.

A smart ambitious lawyer tries to label Jesus: "Teacher, what do I need to do to get eternal life?" But Jesus refuses to be pegged: "What does the Bible say?" Jesus asks in return. "That you love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind and that you love and care for your neighbour as well as you do yourself," answers the lawyer. "Great answer," says Jesus. But looking for a loophole, the lawyer asks: "But who is my neighbour?" In other words, "Who do I not need to love?" And Jesus tells the well-known story of the Good Samaritan:

A guy is waiting at a light in downtown London, when a gang of thugs with knives drag him from his car, cut him up badly, and leave him for dead—driving off to sell his car for drug money. The first guy coming along is the winner of the Chamber of Commerce's most successful business owner of the year award. But he doesn't want to get mixed up with drug gangs and he speeds by in his new BMW Convertible. A Presbyterian Minister happens by next and sees the wounded guy—but being very busy, the minister says a quick prayer, changes lanes and speeds on to the next meeting. But then a tattooed xenophobic young white guy—with hate stickers and racial slurs plastered all over his car—sees the oozing wounds and has compassion. This Good Samaritan calls 911 and

goes in the ambulance with the man and spends the rest of the day at the hospital trying to locate the guy's next of kin.

Our problem is that we are accustomed to Jesus telling us that Samaritans are good. I thought that Samaritans were to Jews like the religious heretics from the other side of the tracks. But Jewish scholar, Amy Jill Levine, set me straight. In fact, she said: "You Christians need to know that Samaritans were outright enemies of Jews. When the Assyrians conquered the Jews—you will remember how they carried many Jews into exile into Assyria. But Assyrians also moved into the Holy Land. They intermarried with Jews and these people became the Samaritans. They were a bi-racial people with a religion that added elements of Assyrian religion to Judaism. There was bad blood between the Samaritans and the Jews. The Samaritans built a rival temple of their own in Samaria—but the Jews attacked and destroyed it. Yet in Jesus' day, the sacrifice of a Samaritan was not accepted in the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. We see evidence of this bad blood in the previous chapter of Luke when a Samaritan Village refuses entry to Jesus.

Yet Jesus makes a Samaritan the hero of his story. Levine points out that there were three kinds of Jews: Priest, Levite and Israelite. Putting Samaritan in," she said, "is like saying Father, Son and Satan." Beyond being a pleasant little goodwill story this parable is a shocking call to the risk-taking venture of loving your enemies. And so it is that the enemy becomes the hero of the story. And Jesus—besides making us kind of angry—sets us to dreaming of a VERY different kind of world where all are one. For as Paul writes in Galatians, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Jesus Christ." (Gal. 3:28) To the question "Who is my neighbour? Jesus answers: "Who isn't?"

Jesus wants us to dream and work toward a very different kind of world, one that is not based on "being right", but one based on enacting mercy to anybody and everybody. I remember catching sight of this vision in a movie theatre some years ago when we had taken our kids to see *How to Train Your Dragon*. Hiccup, an awkward coming of age Viking boy who doesn't really fit into his isolated Viking community that lives to just survive in a harsh environment and to daily fight dragons. To hate dragons is a way of life for them. Then one day Hiccup, who is not very proficient in dragon slaying, finds a wounded night dragon—the scariest most hated dragon of all. But instead of killing the enemy dragon with the broken wing Hiccup shows mercy, like the Good Samaritan. And through this friendship, Hiccup sees that a whole different way is possible, that dragons and Vikings can actually be friends and live in peace; and that it is the monster dragon of sin and evil that really causes all our division.

With Pope Francis' visit, it has been an important week in Canada for healing and reconciliation with our Indigenous brothers and sisters. The house of horrors legacy of the Residential Schools illustrates the great harm we can do when we apply labels and then use them to justify horrific inhuman actions: cultural and linguistic annihilation, verbal, physical and sexual abuse. Our Canadian Government and Canadian churches left our indigenous peoples beaten up and robbed on the side of the road for

generations—without doing a thing to help. But Jesus shows us a different world and way in the story of the Good Samaritan through kindness. The Samaritan shows a love that is without partiality or preference and which expects nothing in return.

You could say that the story of the Good Samaritan is simply a series of small kind acts. He stops, instead of walking by. He bends down and covers a wound. He gives someone a ride on his donkey. He walks to an inn. He gives two coins to the inn keeper. And he says he will come back if more is necessary. Each little act in the chain is a small step that leads to the next and the next—all of which add up to a life saved. These are the tiny dots that God is able to connect into the big theme of Scripture: Steadfast Loving Kindness. You never know when one small act of kindness may lead to another. And you never know the results of some little gift of kindness. Mother Theresa said: *Small things* done with *great love* will change the world.

Best-selling author, Malcolm Gladwell says that he believes that kindness is like a contagious habit—something that you have to practise and do over and over again if you are going to keep doing it. He says that's why it's mentioned so many times in the Bible. Because it's a habit you can forget—like the church forgot in its dealings with Indigenous people. Kindness is a muscle that you have to exercise. You've got to practise it if you are going to be any good at it. So let's practise!

God practises this supremely in moving toward us in Christ—in seeing us in our own wounded, sinful state, in binding up our wounds and paying whatever it costs on the cross to restore us to life. Christ is our beloved Samaritan. And Christ is the only one who is fully able to love God and neighbour as self, as we see clearly in the cross. And through faith in Christ and by the power of the Spirit, we, too, are empowered to “go and do likewise,” as Jesus finally commands of the lawyer (v. 37).