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A Christian By Any Other Name  
Luke 10:25-37

This passage begins by saying that a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. And of course, because we're here in the lawyer capital of the world, I said "Ah, I should start this sermon out with a good lawyer joke!" And so I looked around the internet, and found very funny jokes involving being stuck on desert islands and such, and I spent a good while laughing and calling it "sermon prep," and then I realized that exactly zero of the jokes would be appropriate for church. So we'll just have to skip that part of the sermon and move on.

Actually, let me speak in defense of lawyers for a moment, because I kind of like the lawyer in this passage. See he won't just leave well enough alone. I bet he's heard of this teacher, Jesus, and he wants to find out what he's really made of. Can he handle the tough questions?

So he says "what do I have to do to inherit eternal life?" Well, Jesus is at least a good a teacher as this guy is a lawyer, and turns the question back on him - "have you read the Scriptures?" "Of course," says the lawyer, who wouldn't have been caught dead not having read up on the relevant statutes. "Love the Lord with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind, and your neighbor as yourself." "Good," says Jesus. "Well done."

But he's *not* done. He has to push it, and so he says, "well then, and who is my neighbor?"

You know, if the lawyer had just left it, if he'd just taken the compliment and moved on, this might have been easy. Love your neighbor. Sure, I like Sally and Joe! They keep their yard nice, always invite us over for a Christmas party, and we're happy to dog sit for them when they're out of town. Love your neighbor. Easy.

But that lawyer...

I've heard it said that you shouldn't ask a question if you're not sure you're going to like the answer. But that's what I like about this guy. Maybe he's ready for the answer, or maybe he's just persistent, or stubborn, but whatever it is gave us one of the most well-known, and perhaps misunderstood parables of Jesus.

This is, of course, the parable of the Good Samaritan. We think we know it. I think I know it. A man finds himself beaten on the side of the road, and proceeds to get passed by two people who turn a blind eye, and then finally a Samaritan passes by and takes care of him out of his generosity. And we take this to mean that we ought to be kind to strangers in need, and not only that, there is an entire class of law, Good Samaritan laws, designed to give legal protection to those who give aid to others.

By no means would I like to dissuade you from generosity, but I want you to pause and stand in the lawyers' shoes for a moment. He has given a correct answer and praised, but now, and the end of this fuller explanation, what does the lawyer say or do. When asked by Jesus who the neighbor was truly, he responds that it was the one who showed mercy. But lost to the ages is the tone of his voice and the feeling in his heart when he answers, but I will reckon to you these 2000 years later that it wasn't pride at a wise answer he felt, or a desire to be a helpful citizen, but shame.

See, Jesus doesn't just pick any three people to walk by this man beaten on the side of the road. He picks a priest, a Levite, and a Samaritan. You'd be hard pressed to find better examples of polar opposites on the "good Jew" spectrum in first century Palestine. On the one end, a priest and a Levite, unparalleled examples of righteousness. On the other, a Samaritan.

If you're unfamiliar with who a Samaritan is and what that means, the Harry Potter novels contain a reasonably good parallel. In them, the character Hermione is repeatedly referred to as a "mudblood," meaning somebody who isn't a "pure" wizard or witch, descended from Muggle parents. If you heard all of that and it still makes no sense, what I'm trying to say is that a Samaritan was considered something of a "half-Jew," which was almost worse than a Gentile. Samaritans purported to worship the same God and keep the same laws, and yet they had been separated and isolated from the rest of the Jewish community, perhaps during the exile, and had developed their own traditions and practices. And so for a "good" Jew, Samaritans were dirty, partial Jews. Mudbloods.

So for Jesus to say, "Look, this guy is hurt and needs help, and who stops, and who passes by?," is to say that something has gone wrong. The priest should stop. The Levite should stop. Without getting into the details, it's their duty to do so. But who actually stops, and not only that, puts up his own money to take care of this guy? It's the person nobody suspects and everybody is suspicious of - the Samaritan.

There's a famous social experiment involving Princeton Seminary students that you've likely heard of. They were asked to prepare a talk on what it means to be a minister, and some were given the prompt of this parable to reflect on. Then, on their way over to the talk, an actor was staged obviously in need of help - essentially creating the circumstances of the parable. I'm sure you already know how this is going to end. No, students were no more likely to stop who had reflected on the parable, and the only thing likely to encourage help was if the student wasn't in a rush.

Have you ever heard anybody wonder why it seems like people who aren't Christians act more Christian than the people who say they are Christians? As it turns out, Jesus wonders that too.

It seems then, like the punchline is, "do better." Sure, we could all stand to do better, not the least of whom is me. But beyond that, I feel surprised, because I'm feeling a mischievous sense of pleasure in the Samaritan twist. Sure, the priest and the Levite both fail, and yes, they are my

closest analogues in this story, but ultimately, their failure seems to have no bearing on whether or not the beaten man is cared for. “The religious leaders won’t do it?” says God. “Fine, I’ll send a Samaritan.” God doesn’t seem the least bit foiled by our tepidness.

Each day, we are given stories of people who take up the mantle of compassion and justice when the people who are supposed to hold it have laid it down, or simply because their love of neighbor can only be expressed in action. Last year, 16 year old Swedish student Greta Thunberg skipped school to picket outside of the Swedish parliament in order to demand more concerted action on dealing with climate change. In less than a year, thousands of protests were organized by students demanding that adults around the world take up a cause that is and will directly affect the youngest among us.

This is not their responsibility. Their responsibility is to go to school, work hard, and figure out how on earth to navigate the world as a teenager. School dances and calculus exams should be their business. Instead, they demand action because the people who ought to be caring for their future are asleep at the wheel.

When I see children protesting, I’m not sure what to feel. I feel bad, like I ought to be doing more. I also feel joy, proud that they won’t stand by idly. I feel this strange mixture of guilt and hope, and mixed together in the right proportion - well, maybe I’ll be convinced to listen harder to what God is calling me to do.

As it has been through every time and place, we live in a world in need of healing, and you and I, the people of God, are called to be healers. And at the same time, at least by the evidence, God seems to be calling other people, people unlike us, and perhaps even people we find unlikely, to be agents of healing as well.

We live in a fascinating time in human history, marked by a great intersection of culture, ethnicity, and religion. Not so long ago, you could have lived the vast majority of your life with limited exposure to people different from you, but these days you would have to go to great lengths, especially in a place like ours, to avoid people who are different. And as a consequence, the story of the Good Samaritan isn’t a story anymore, a mere thought experiment, but a lived reality. So we see images of Jews forming circles of peace and protection around mosques during Friday prayers in the wake of violent attacks. And we see humanists and atheists stepping up and serving at church-run food pantries. All the time we see people unlike us doing acts of love in service to their neighbor. We see people, with and without the label, acting as Christians.

What are we to do with this? First, and this is perhaps the obvious point, is that the first century Jews were wrong about the Samaritans, and we are sometimes wrong about people who are strange and unfamiliar. But second, and equally as important, is that God’s will isn’t thwarted by Christians being unwilling to heed a call. God has, is, and will use everybody and anybody to go ahead and get the job done. The saints of God are everywhere.

Does that mean it's time to pack it up and leave it to somebody else? Of course not. Jesus' intent wasn't to let the lawyer, or the priest, or the Levite off the hook. Just the opposite. So to get us back on the hook, God has given us servants and saints from every corner of the earth to show us what is good, and right, and loving, and just. These saints don't necessarily come with the label Christian, but the evidence of their actions is a powerful testimony to the goodness of God who is Lord of all people in every time and place. It is a testimony to God's grace.

How will we know what God wants of us? It sounds parochial, but the Bible's not a bad start. But if you're like me, sometimes the words still feel like they need to come to life. Fortunately, I think God knows that too. I think God knows that we learn by example. And so the words of Scripture are also written on the faces of our neighbors if only we would read them. May God give us the eyes to see and hearts to join in the work God is doing through them.