

## Sermon: July 10, 2022 – Luke 10: 25-37

Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

Just out of curiosity, I asked Professor Google a question this week: “which are the most popular parables of Jesus?” A review of a half dozen totally non-scientific articles shows that two parables seem to make everyone’s top five list: the parable of The Prodigal Son, and today’s gospel reading, the parable of The Good Samaritan.

And no wonder. If we take it as presented in the gospel of Luke, it is a towering story of unexpected and even unreasonable kindness, expressing a new answer to the question, “who is my neighbour?” Its example of selfless assistance is mirrored by Good Samaritan legislation in many states and provinces, which offers legal protection to people who assist those who appear to be injured, ill, in peril, or incapacitated.

In the parable, when the Samaritan traveller on a notoriously dangerous road from Jericho to Jerusalem comes upon a person who has been beaten and robbed, and then ignored by others travelling the road, the Samaritan not only stops to help; he takes the injured one to a safe place where he can recover, pays for his care, and promises to come back and pay any further expenses that have been incurred. If we continue past the end of the parable, where Jesus turns to his questioner with the directive to “go and do likewise,” we take this story as an example: “be like the Samaritan”.

No matter what else we make of this story, these are words that cannot be unheard: “go and do likewise.” In situations where someone is in need and all I can think is, “what’s the least I can do here and not look like an uncaring jerk?” this 2000-year-old story pushes me to go beyond that, to emulate the Samaritan in this story. Yes, we need to ensure our own safety, yes, compassion fatigue is a real thing and it’s impossible to help everywhere we want to and yes, we’re out of practice on how to physically assist others after two years of two metre distancing... and yet, we are urged to do more. Even now, each time we can move beyond a sending a cuddly emoji to someone in their life challenges, to actually stepping into their uncomfortable realities and assisting in ways that they request, the more we will develop a muscle memory of what it is to do things that are meaningful and brave and compassionate.

So, let’s take those words, “go and do likewise” and store them where they won’t be invisible or forgotten. And, having done that, let’s return to the parable and hear what else it has to say, not so focused on that final sentence.

Some of you are familiar with the work of John Dominic Crossan. He’s a prolific author, having written over 30 books, still going strong as he approaches age 90. His work with Marcus Borg and, more recently, Richard Rohr, have helped many to understand the life and words of Jesus in a whole new way. My favourite work of his, however, is not one of his best-sellers from the early 2000s, but rather a slim little volume he wrote when still in his 30s, dating way back to 1973, entitled *In Parables*. In that little book, he suggests a different approach to the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

Crossan, along with many theologians, urges us to understand that a story told in the fine tradition of the ancient near east needs to stand on its own two feet. If there is a preamble or set-up to the story, and/or a separately stated moral to the story at the end, we should suspect that they were added later on. In the case of the Parable of the Good Samaritan, then, if we want to zero in on the story that Jesus told, we would set to one side the preamble about a lawyer asking Jesus a question, and the tacked-on conclusion about “doing likewise”,

and look only at verses 30 to (35 or) 36, the story itself. These verses we can be more confident to be words of Jesus, rather than explanatory words from Luke.

At this point we recall the huge cultural divide in that time and place between Jews and Samaritans. The dominant culture had widespread bigotry toward the Samaritans, whose ethnicity was dismissed as mixed-race, and whose religious practices were snobbishly regarded as mixed-up. Neither group chose to interact with the other. With that in mind, here is what Crossan had to say about this story of a traveller who has been wounded, and robbed, and ignored by two different levels of Jewish clergy before a Samaritan stops to help: "The amount of space given to the description of the Samaritan's action [i.e., the extent of the assistance offered] is significant. Even in the English translation, far more space (66 words) is devoted to this description than to any other of the elements in the story. Why?... So the hearer must see, feel and hear the goodness of the Samaritan". This would run contrary to the hearer's natural inclination, which would be to regard "Good Samaritan" as an oxymoron. Samaritans can't be good, right?

In the story, two highly-regarded Jewish travellers who would be expected to help – a Priest and a Levite – do nothing to help the wounded man, and much has been written about reasons they could offer to justify their lack of engagement. But then a third passer-by – not just any passer-by, but a Samaritan – stops to help. In Crossan's opinion, it would be impossible for us to over-emphasize the importance of Jesus' naming the hero of the story as a Samaritan: "If Jesus wanted to teach love of a neighbour in distress, it would have sufficed to talk of one person, a second person, and a third person. If he wanted to do this and add in a jibe against the clerical circles of Jerusalem, it would have been quite enough to have mentioned Priest and Levite and let the third person be a Jewish layperson. Most importantly, if he wanted to inculcate love of one's enemies, [Jesus could have said that the wounded person in the story was] a Samaritan, and have a Jewish person stop and assist. But when the story is read as one told by the Jewish Jesus to a Jewish audience, this original context demands that the Samaritan be heard as the outcast that he was. The whole thrust of the story demands that one say what cannot be said, what is a contradiction in terms: Good + Samaritan".

Now normally, I would stop at that point, and have all of you consider who the Samaritans are in your worldview. I can guarantee you that I have done that before, having preached on this parable at least 10 to 20 times over the past 40 years. But today I'm going to pull up short of having us identify the "Samaritans" in our worldview because of this: that still lets me feel superior to those other/lesser people, as I subtly review the reasons why I would pass a blanket judgement on that particular group. So, I want to ask more of a gut question: can you recall a situation in your life when pre-judging has shaped your actions? And if you can identify such a pre-judgment, a.k.a. pre-judice, I invite you to recognize that for what it is. When I dehumanize and prejudge I have fallen into the same trap that Jesus is addressing in this parable... which makes it imperative that I take it to heart. And it's not just individuals who do this: cultures, communities, even Churches need to do some soul-searching here.

Lest we think that this is the final word – to feel aware, even remorseful of such prejudice in our practice – Crossan reminds us that Jesus' parables are rarely just about behaviour. Jesus, in his words and deeds, in his dying and rising, proclaims nothing less than a world made new. And with that we return one last time to John Dominic Crossan who writes, that in the telling and hearing of this parable, and the way that it challenges the presupposition of its hearers, "the Kingdom of God breaks abruptly into human consciousness and demands the overturn of prior values, closed options, set judgments, and established conclusions.... The

hearer struggling with the [inherent contradiction] of Good/Samaritan is actually experiencing in and through this struggle the in-breaking of the Kingdom. Not only does it happen *like* this, it happens *in* this.”

Let’s give that a moment to sink in. When we identify our oppressing prejudices and open ourselves to new ways without them, we are not only following the example of Jesus, we are opening ourselves to the in-breaking of the Kin-dom of God. By creating a narrative in which a despised Samaritan not only does better in helping a person in need than the much more respectable Priest and the Levite, but is the unquestioned hero of the story, Jesus invites us not only to change our behaviours but to open our imagination to a new realm, the Kin-dom of God, a transformed, just way of being that is founded in God’s own equity and love.

Before concluding, I do feel compelled to diverge just a bit from Crossan’s desire to see the parable entirely separate from its preamble. In its setting in the gospel of Luke, just before the parable a teacher of the law is jousting with Jesus about the two-fold great commandment, “You shall 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 your neighbor as yourself.” In order to find just how far he needs to stretch his boundaries, the teacher of the law asks Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” and in response to that question, Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan.

For me, this question, whether it was part of the original setting of this parable or was placed there later by Luke, helps me to hear everything the parable has to say. “Who is my neighbour? The Samaritan – who had good reasons why he would want no part of helping out on a dangerous road in hostile territory – saw the wounded man as neighbour. The hearer, as Crossan points out, is challenged to see the Samaritan as neighbour. And when I consider all this, I am reminded of a wonderful quote I have shared with you before, from Cynthia Bourgeault: “One of the most familiar of Jesus’ teachings is ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ But we almost always hear that wrong: ‘Love your neighbor as much as yourself....’ If you listen closely to Jesus however, there is no ‘as much as’ in his admonition. It’s just ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’—as a continuation of your very own being. It’s a complete seeing, that your neighbor is you”.

In this parable and in the words around it, we are called to a greatly expanded concept of “neighbour” – and to see that neighbour in such a way that prejudice no longer separates us from the Samaritan; with such caring, that we could not imagine walking past the plight of the injured traveller; with so much connection, that to ignore the plight of anyone who has been wounded by life would be to deny our own humanity. In the new way of Jesus, the “complete seeing” that Cynthia Bourgeault speaks of, life is shaped by a completeness of love and action, truth-seeking and advocacy, compassion and engagement and justice. Let that love infuse our lives, now and always. Amen.

References cited:

Bourgeault, Cynthia. *The Wisdom Jesus: Transforming Heart and Mind—A New Perspective on Christ and His Message* (Shambhala: 2008), pp. 31-32. Accessed via the 17 January 2019 daily email of [www.centerforactionandcontemplation.com](http://www.centerforactionandcontemplation.com)

Crossan, John Dominic. *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus*. NYC: Harper and Row, 1973. pp. 57-66

Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Good\\_Samaritan\\_law](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Good_Samaritan_law)

© 2022 Rev Greg Wooley, Ralph Connor Memorial United Church