

Proper 10-C RCL
July 11, 2010
St. Stephen's, Spokane

I came across an article a few years ago whose title was, “Is There Anything New to Say About the Good Samaritan?” After more than a few years of preaching, I thought that’s not a bad question to ask about this text or really any text – especially the ones we know well and hear over and over again. Sometimes a new angle can be a challenge.

At another level, if scripture is really the living word, there has to be something new, something fresh, something percolating every time we read it. There are always new connections, new ideas. So there ought to be something new to hear and something new to say.

The theologian Karl Barth was often quoted as saying that the theologian (and certainly the preacher) should read the Bible and the newspaper side by side. I couldn’t agree more.

And of course a newspaper is often where we see the term ‘Good Samaritan’ the term “good Samaritan” has a meaning all its own in our lifetime and in our culture. People use it all the time even if they don’t have a clue what a Samaritan is. Most often, we call someone a good Samaritan when they offer kindness to a stranger. I heard the term used at least four times last week on the TV news – someone who helped a stranded driver after a crash put him into a ditch. It was someone who helped a child in distress.

We even have good Samaritan laws that protect those helpers from undue liability during their rescue attempts. I remember learning about this when I was being certified as a lifeguard many years ago.

But the parable of the Good Samaritan has a context. And it has a shock value that is for us as much as it was for the folks who gathered around Jesus. And it begins with some very good questions.

A lawyer is challenging Jesus: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” he asks. And when Jesus asks him what the law says, his answer comes back quickly: love God with your heart, soul and strength and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself – an answer drawn from Leviticus and Deuteronomy. That’s the right answer, but it isn’t enough to satisfy the lawyer, who asks the question that drives this whole encounter: “Who is my neighbor?”

And that’s where Jesus tells this parable, that is filled with challenge, intrigue and surprise. It’s the very brief story of a man who is assaulted and robbed and left by the roadside to die. Maybe not so different than things we hear on the evening news.

But there is more. One by one, along come two Jewish religious professionals – people we would probably expect to show compassion to him--a priest and a Levite. Both of them choose to pass by – choose not to help him. And then comes another person, a Samaritan. If we were hearing this story in the time and culture in which it was told, we would never expect him to be the hero because Samaritans were people who, in that culture, were absolutely despised. People with whom you would not have any kind of relationship. People who you would not want to even touch you. This Samaritan turns out to be the man who does show compassion for the victim of the robbers – lavishes attention on him. Bandages his wounds. Takes him to an inn and pays for his room and his meals.

Sometimes this story is described as charming or heartwarming. But the reality is that it is outrageous – full of characters who are exaggerated and some of whom are not terribly likeable. And it doesn’t even provide a clear answer to the question, “Who is my neighbor?” Instead it shows us a risky kind of neighborly behavior.

There were risks for all three characters who could have helped. It really isn’t clear who the man by the roadside was or what his ethnicity was. But it could have been risky for any of the three to have helped him. This may seem odd if we just see this man as a man who is injured and lying on the

roadside, but there were significant religious issues at work here. The priest would have defiled himself if he had touched the injured man if he had been dead or non-Judean. He would have to return home in shame and be purified, so he moves on.

The Levite might have seen the priest pass by. He had the same kinds of religious issues about who he could touch. Besides, if he stopped and the priest didn't it might have insulted the priest. So he goes on his way, too.

The Samaritan is the wild card into the story. The Samaritans were a splinter group of Judaism, a few hundred descendants of whom still exist today. They were strictly out of bounds for the mainstream of Judaism – people with whom Jews would have no relationship.

In the parable, this outcast, this Samaritan treated the anonymous injured man as his neighbor, tended his wounds with a degree of tenderness. But there were also great risks for him. One was that the victim might have hated him for defiling him if he were Judean. Or, if he died, his family might have hated this rescuer for defiling him with Samaritan wine and oil or by touching him. Despite those risks, he takes the injured man to an inn, pays his expenses and offers to come back and pay more if more is needed. He has, in every sense of the term, gone the extra mile. Ironically, the Samaritan, who is totally outside the scope of respectable Judaism, is the one who demonstrates love of God and neighbor.

This story is designed to make Jesus' hearers more than a little bit uncomfortable – or at least challenged. And that is true for us, too. Who is my neighbor – the one I am called to love? The very difficult answer is that it is all of humanity.

Most of us, as we hear this parable have a couple of reactions. One is to remember some of our experiences of giving or receiving some unexpected act of care or generosity from a stranger. I always remember a dark, winter night on the almost deserted Hanford highway in 1969 when a car literally

forced us off the road and into a patch of snow. It was terrifying. But it turned out that the man who forced us off the road was our rescuer. He had noticed that our tail lights were beginning to get dimmer and dimmer and figured out that our alternator was failing. So he forced us into the only space on that shoulder-less road that was wide enough to leave a disabled car. Then he offered us a ride the 20 miles or so into Richland. He could easily have passed us and left us out there in the winter cold on a highway that few people traveled. But instead, he offered compassion. Took a risk. And we were grateful.

This parable also reminds us of the people we have passed by. The stranded drivers, the people who have asked us for a handout, the difficult plights that people find themselves in that we aren't ready to engage with. We have a lot of reasons for not getting involved. Some good, some not so good. Will we be robbed? Cheated? Injured? Sued? Is the risk too great? Do we want to get involved? This parable usually brings them to mind. And it's a good thing to wrestle with those complicated issues. We did pray in today's collect, after all, that we might "know and understand what things we ought to do and have grace and power faithfully to accomplish them."

But as helpful as those experiences and reflections are, the truth is that we have domesticated this parable. Tamed it. Taken away the shock value. The driving question is still, "Who is our neighbor?" The bottom line of this parable is a giant reminder that we are called to love God and neighbor. Those two loves are inseparable. We can't truly love God without loving humanity. And our love of others springs from our love of God and God's love for us.

Our neighbor is not just the person we know and like. We, as children of God, are in relationship with all of humanity. Sometimes that insight comes to us in a great "aha" as if we were seeing the world with new eyes. John Donne, priest and poet, wrote in a familiar meditation, "No man is an island, entire of itself every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main." And at a much

more mundane and contemporary level, author Anne Lamott came to love the most annoying mother in her son's class over a cup of mint tea when, as she explained it, "something within her softened."

Who is our neighbor? The truth is that most of us are still figuring that out. Still wrestling with how total strangers, people we might not like much, don't admire or don't even give a thought to, are our neighbors. That pesky good Samaritan, lavishing compassion on a stranger who might well have despised him, throws a monkey wrench into our complacency and gives us a scriptural kick in the pants.

Is there anything new to say about the Good Samaritan? I'm sure there is because the parable, like all parables, comes with an invitation -- an invitation to continue the story with our lives today, tomorrow and beyond. And this this parable is a doozey.