

## Sam's Story • Luke 10:25-37

The United States, along with NATO allies, bombed Yugoslavia in an attempt to stop the conflict between the Serfs and the ethnic Albanians in Kosovo. The hatred between people in the Balkans runs very deep. It is political with opposing claims of sovereignty and autonomy. It is ethnic between those with ancestry coming from the west and those with ancestry coming from the east. It is religious between Christians and Muslims. It is a mess! It is rooted in a hatred that goes back for generations.

It is not unlike the divisions between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, Tutsis and Hutus in Rwanda, Jews and Arabs in Palestine or a whole array of racial, political and religious prejudices between the peoples of the United States.

It was very much the same way between Jews and Samaritans in the first century Roman world in the land of Palestine. They had political differences, ethnic differences and religious differences to the point that they hated one another. They didn't even speak to one another. There was no trust between a Jew and a Samaritan. That is why it is especially amazing that Jesus would choose a Samaritan to be the hero in one of the most famous stories he ever told.

Luke describes what happened in chapter 10 verses 25-37 of his biography of Jesus;

*On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"*

*"What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"*

*He answered: "'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, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"*

*"You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."*

*But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"*

*In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the*

*hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'*

*"Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"*

The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him."

*Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."*

It all started with a question from a lawyer. I'll skip the temptation to tell a lawyer joke here because it wasn't exactly a lawyer as we think of a

lawyer. This was a religious lawyer, an expert on the Jewish Old Testament and how its regulations were to be lived out in everyday life.

This lawyer did what a lot of people do. He asked a question more to start an argument than to discover the truth. He wanted to test Jesus. Now, I'm sure he was smart, articulate, well educated and very religious. He expected to win the argument. So he asked Jesus, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

It was a good question, a great question. Except Jesus knew he wasn't asking to learn how to get to heaven or to have eternal life. He wanted to trick Jesus. So, Jesus answered the question with another question. He said, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?"

***Too often we blame people for their problems and excuse ourselves from helping them.***

Have you seen Orthodox Jews with little leather boxes strapped to their heads or wrists? Those boxes are called phylacteries. Orthodox Jews still do today what this lawyer probably did back then. They have pieces of paper with parts of the Jewish law in these containers. Jesus was telling him to read what was there. Knowing exactly what Jesus meant, the man answered with direct quotes from the Bible: “*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 ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’*”

Jesus told the lawyer that he had a great answer and to just go and do what he just quoted. Jesus had already figured out that this man wasn’t capable of wholeheartedly loving God or of loving his neighbor as himself.

The lawyer did what many of us tend to do. He tried to make himself look good. He did what most of the religious lawyers of his time did. He tried to wiggle out of responsibility by defining *neighbor* in such a careful and tricky way as to exempt himself from really doing what the law intended. It was sort of like deciding what your definition of “is” is.

He asked Jesus, “*And who is my neighbor?*” You see, religious lawyers were defining *neighbor* as fellow Jews who were just like themselves. This way they were off the hook and didn’t have to love or even like anyone who was different or with whom they disagreed. They could hate the people they didn’t like and love the people they did like and argue that they loved their neighbors just like God ordered them to do. Clever, huh?

Jesus took an entirely different approach. Instead of arguing about the definition of *neighbor*, Jesus called the lawyer and everyone else to loving action. Jesus told a story that we have recorded in Luke 10:25-37. We call it the story of the Good Samaritan.

He starts out by explaining that someone who loves others needs to see the need. Jesus told about a man who “*was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead.*”

Everyone who was listening to Jesus as he told this story knew that this guy was really stupid. He had no business traveling alone on the road that

goes from Jerusalem to Jericho. It is one of the most desolate and dangerous roads in the world. Even today you would be foolish to travel that road alone. I have traveled it and I have been awed by the bleakness of the terrain. Virtually no one lives there. There are no towns, gas stations or typical signs of civilization. Back then there were groups of bandits who routinely robbed, beat and murdered travelers. Your best bet was to avoid the road altogether. If you had to travel it you were safest with a large caravan and armed guards. To travel alone was suicidal.

This is a story about someone in need. The issue isn’t how the man got into the mess he was in. He was hurt and needed help. Too often we blame people for their problems and excuse ourselves from helping them. We say that he was fired because he drank too much. She was raped because she went to a party she never should have been at. They were in a car crash because they foolishly drove during an ice storm. He has AIDS because of his sexual behavior. She flunked out because she didn’t do her homework. People bring problems on themselves.

All of this may be quite true, but Jesus says nothing about how someone got in trouble and everything about how to help them out of trouble.

Christian Raymond was a 23-year-old shepherd in France who fell over a steep ravine, catching the edge of the cliff with his fingertips as he did. No one was around to help him, but a bizarre thing happened. As he fell his cell phone came out of his pocket and landed on the ledge near his face. Earlier in the day he had called the emergency number, so he pushed redial with his nose. After hanging by his fingertips for 20 minutes, the rescue unit came and saved his life.

Should the rescuers have told him to be more careful and that he brought it on himself? Of course not! When a man has a need he must be helped. That’s what Jesus was saying.

Along that treacherous road came two potential helpers. Each of them looked at the half-dead victim and refused to stop and help. It is possible that they had pretty good excuses for passing by without helping.

The first one was a priest. At that time in Israel there was a surplus of priests so they served at the

Temple in Jerusalem on a rotation basis. It was a comparatively rare assignment. The priest wanted to get to Jerusalem for the high and holy privilege of serving God and God’s people. However, any priest who touched a dead person was technically disqualified for seven days. He would lose his turn at the Temple. So, when faced with the choice of serving in the liturgy or helping a man who might die on him, he chose to go with religious service.

You may see this differently than I see it. I’ve wondered what I would do if I saw a car accident or someone needing help on my way to church services at Wooddale Church. Should I stop to help or hurry along and hope someone else will stop? Would the people at Wooddale Church understand if I didn’t show up? Would it make a difference if it were Easter Sunday morning?

The second was a Levite. He was part of the Temple staff, but not a priest. We don’t know why he kept going. It may have been a safety issue with him. In those days, like today, there were bandits who set up decoys. Stop to help someone and the rest will jump out and get you. It was too risky for him. He decided not to take a chance.

Obviously, Jesus disapproved of the actions of both the priest and the Levite. There is a lesson here for us. It is that our seemingly valid excuses for not getting involved with the needs of others are rarely legitimate. We should listen to Jesus when he tells us to skip the excuses.

Instead, Jesus introduces the hero of the story who helped the hurting. He couldn’t have shocked his listeners more than with his choice of a Samaritan. Jews and Samaritans hated each other and certainly didn’t help each other. The lawyer would have assumed the Samaritan to be the villain, not the hero.

The Samaritan not only stopped; he became involved. He was a good man with good credit. He was willing to use his resources and reputation to help someone who could not help himself. He was prepared in advance with oil and wine (an emergency first aid kit) just in case. He showed no hint

of pride, self-preservation or selfishness. He saw a man who needed help and he gave him the help he needed.

Father Tim Power is a good friend of mine. He was the founding pastor of Pax Christi Catholic Community here in Eden Prairie. Father Tim tells an interesting story about George Conn, a Presbyterian minister in Virginia who had a second job as a reserve chaplain in the United States Navy. He was new to the chaplaincy when he was called on to marry a couple in trouble. The groom was 18 and in jail for desertion. His bride-to-be was 17

and six months pregnant. The marriage would make the bride eligible for military medical benefits. The chaplain thought, “This is not the sort of thing they teach you about in seminary; two children quickly getting married for all the wrong reasons—in a hurried service, performed by a strange minister, before the groom is shipped off to be punished.”

But he did what he was assigned to do. He performed a very short ceremony at the jail. The bride looked scared, desperate and pathetic. The vows were repeated, the rings were quickly exchanged, there was a brief kiss and a benediction. Then this Presbyterian minister did what was his custom in all the other weddings he performed—he shook the groom’s hand and kissed the bride on her cheek. She jumped backwards in shock. Tears flooded down her cheeks. Wide eyed with amazement she asked, “You would kiss me?”

There he stood, a Naval officer in his dress uniform, decorated with stripes representing rank, authority and importance. “You would kiss me?” she asked.

That’s what Jesus is talking about here—helping the hurting, loving the desperate, reaching out to the troubled, caring about those no one else cases about. That is the way to love one’s neighbor and that is the way to love God. Action, not argument!

So who’s who in this famous story? If you were asked to play one of the characters, which one would be the best fit?

***Are you the Samaritan, willing to go out of your way, willing to spend your money, willing to get dirty to help someone who may not even deserve the help you offer?***

Are you the traveler who make stupid choices that left you stripped of your possessions, beat up and half dead? Are you in trouble, hanging by your finger tips from a cliff? Are you the one who is hurting?

Maybe you would play the part of the priest, on your way to do something important. You have appointments to keep and people to impress and God to serve. You don't have time to help those who are desperate and dying.

Would you be asked to play the part of the Levite? You're an otherwise good person, but you want to play it safe; you don't want to take chances and put yourself at risk. You don't want to get yourself hurt or lose what you have. You know that if you connect with someone who is desperate you might be sucked into that person's problems.

Or are you the Samaritan, willing to go out of your way, willing to spend your money, willing to get dirty to help someone who may not even deserve the help you offer? Are you willing to kiss someone no one else would even touch?

Who's who in this story?

If I were casting the story of the Good Samaritan the person I would choose to play the part of the Samaritan is Jesus himself because, in a sense, this is a story about Jesus. As the Son of God he was willing to give up prestige, power, position and wealth to step down from heaven into our human mess and help us sinners. He loved us; he loves us all the way. Jesus knows how and why we've gotten ourselves into the messes we're in and he loves us anyway. He reaches out and kisses us, helps us, heals us and loves us. This is the story of the crucifixion. This is the hope of Easter. Jesus is our Good Samaritan.

What if the half-dead man along the roadside had refused the Samaritan's help? I suppose that could have happened because in reality it does happen. But, it would have been the most foolish thing that traveler had ever done.

If that person along the side of the road is you, accept Jesus' help. Let him be your Good Samaritan. Let him touch you and heal you. Let him love you and carry you. Accept his gifts. Accept Jesus Christ.

I can think of no better time than on the first day of Holy week, the anniversary of the time when Jesus gave his greatest help of all, to pray a prayer of commitment to God. Tell him you are hurting. Tell him you are a sinner. Ask him to be your Samaritan. Ask him to be your Savior and the Lord of your life.

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