

On Going and Doing Likewise

(And Other Observations from the Parable of the Good Samaritan)

First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, IL
Luke 10:25-37
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If you ask people what their favorite bible story is, many will name this story from Luke. If you ask what their favorite parable is, many more will name this parable of the good Samaritan.

These characters are like members of our family. We know them.

The **lawyer** in the story gets the ball rolling by asking a good question. Loving God, self, and neighbor are at the center of living the life God intends. When the lawyer asks who his neighbor is, he's probably asking a question like, "*Where do I draw the line. I mean, everybody is not my neighbor, right?*"

Wrong. Jesus' definition of neighbor is pretty big. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

When Jesus tells the story, he introduces us to **robbers**, a **victim**, a **Levite**, a **Priest**, an **inn keeper**, a **donkey** (the text isn't specific, but it's some beast of burden), and a **Samaritan**.

The road "down" from Jerusalem to Jericho is quite a road. Pilgrims walk that road nowadays. There's a 2,500 foot drop from Jerusalem to Jericho. The road was dangerous.

When the Levite and Priest see the man who has been left for dead, they famously pass by on the other side. We can guess that they thought (1) I am forbidden by God's Torah to touch a dead person, unless it's a member of my immediate family, and, (2) If he's dead, let the dead bury their own dead.

The Samaritan, a cousin to the Jews Jesus was telling this story to, was bound by the same cleanliness codes. The Samaritan was forbidden by the same Torah to touch a carcass. And what good could possibly come for stopping to prod a dead man?

The Samaritan did stop, however, did take the time, did reach out, did offer some help in a desperate situation. And that's Jesus' point. Who acted like a neighbor to the injured man?

How did the lawyer answer Jesus' question? The lawyer said, "The one who showed him mercy." Notice that the (Jewish) lawyer didn't say, "The Samaritan." We can guess that the Lawyer could not be brought to utter the word "Samaritan."

Jesus' point is that anybody *could be* our neighbor, and every one *should be* our neighbor. We can hear the lawyer chaffing: *but even a Samaritan?*

Yes, Jesus would say, even a Samaritan. Neighbors don't create love, but love always creates neighbors. And we are called to love everybody.^[1] The law says it: "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 (love) your neighbor as yourself." Don't just say it, do it.

As the Samaritan reached out, slowed down, risked, cared, listened, helped, healed, and LOVED, Jesus called that lawyer to "Go and do likewise."

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One of things about this text I've always wanted to explore is, "who is the Samaritan for me?" The Samaritans and Jews were famously at odds with one another. With whom am I at odds? Who is the total outsider I'm called to share neighborly love?

Clarence Jordan wrote the Cotton Patch Gospel. And in his retelling of this parable in the vernacular of the 1960's South, the Samaritan is a black man who helps a white man on the shoulder of the highway. The Priest and Scribe who passed by on the other side were a white preacher and white teacher.

It's difficult, but not impossible, for me to image the "hated other" could be somebody whose skin was a different color.

Some years ago, Sabrina Hwu, Lizz Pippin, and I took some of our high school youth to an urban immersion Go and Serve Mission Trip to Little Rock, AR. We worked in a food bank, and second-hand store, and a soup kitchen. We toured the Heifer Project Headquarters and went to the Clinton Presidential Library. We grew a lot, served a lot, and learned a lot.

On one of our free afternoons, we toured Central High School. We learned about the Civil Rights story that played out there. As you remember, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 that segregation in public school was illegal. In 1957, nine black students (later known as the Little Rock Nine) tried to enroll at and attend Central High. President Eisenhower (who later became a member of the Gettysburg Presbyterian Church) insisted these kids could go to school at Central High; Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus (for whom many Presbyterian Elders served in his cabinet) insisted they could not go to school at Central High.

Before our group took the tour, I told the kids about the significance of this school and how the desegregation battle was so important.

Our kids—and they all happened to be from the Congo—had trouble believing the Little Rock Nine were denied entry to school because of the color of their skin. They thought I was joking when I told them this.

There was a day when black people might say, the "Samaritan" in this bible story was a white person. There was a day when white people might say, the "Samaritan" in this bible story was a black person.

I pray those day are over.

The Samaritan is . . . the trans-person/middle-aged white pastor with old ideas, the republican/democrat, the hippy/the skin head, the biker/the banker, the farm family/the city dweller, the Ukrainian/the Russian. Who is the Samaritan?

Whoever the Samaritan is for you, find a way to meet and get to know him, to serve him, to learn her story, to love them.

Jesus wants us to be a good neighbor. *Keep that Samaritan of long ago in mind. Be a neighbor like he was a neighbor. Do it like he did it—with devotion, with courage, with love.*

AMEN.

^[1] I stole this line, but I'm uncertain where it came from. The Anchor Bible Commentary, probably.