

SERMON FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
“Who is My Neighbour?” based on Luke 10:25-37

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The phrase, “Good Samaritan”, is a familiar one to many people. Here in North America, it is often used on the news when a person enters a difficult situation to help others who are in need.

In Western Canada, they have the Good Samaritan Society – a faith-based charity that provides accommodations and health care to aging individuals in need. And in other places, I believe there are many similar organizations that use the title “good Samaritan.”

That means the concept of a Good Samaritan is familiar to the society we live in. Good Samaritans help where needed. Good Samaritans are good people who place the welfare of others first.

In our gospel reading this morning Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan in response to a question from an “expert in the law”, a man who was knowledgeable and well-trained in the Scriptures.

The question this man asks is this: *“What must I do to get eternal life?”*

Unfortunately this question is a test, not based on his curiosity. This expert in law was not in doubt about his own salvation. He just wants to make sure that Jesus provides a definition of righteousness that fits with the teachings of the Pharisees.

And Jesus, knowing that this man is an expert in the law, responds wisely saying, *“What is written in the law? What do you read there?”* (Luke 10:26)

And the man answers with confidence, *“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 neighbour as yourself.”* (Luke 10:27)

This man quotes from Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. Love God and love your neighbour – two commands that we now call the greatest commandment. That tells us that he actually knows about the law and even memorized them. So Jesus answers him saying, *“You have given the right answer; do this and you will live.”*

However, this wasn't enough for the expert in the law. He asks Jesus another question: "And who is my neighbour?"

For a moment, let's give this man the benefit of the doubt. Perhaps he wasn't simply trying to test or trap Jesus. Perhaps he was genuinely wrestling with the question. After all, maybe many of us have asked this question ourselves?

When we hear the Great Commandment—that we are to love our neighbour—it's natural to wonder: *Who exactly does Jesus mean?* Is He talking about the people who live next door, the literal neighbour? Or those in our neighbourhood? Or neighbouring country, which means our friend south the border? Or does Jesus refer to only fellow Christians?

And beneath that question lies another, the more uncomfortable one: *Who is not my neighbour?* Is there anyone I am not obligated to love? Is there a line somewhere that marks the limits of my responsibility?

And those are the question Jesus is about to answer. But as He so often does, He doesn't answer it with a definition. He answers it with a parable, he answers it with a story.

Before we get deeper into the parable, in Jewish culture, scholar argues based on their sociological research, only a fellow Jew was considered a neighbour for a Jew back then. The command to love your neighbour did not extend to anyone else.

And here, Jesus develops a new teaching for them as He answers with the parable of the Good Samaritan. The parable of the Good Samaritan is the story of a man going from Jerusalem to Jericho ambushed by robbers who strip him, rob him, beat him, and leave him

for dead. A priest and a Levite pass by without helping him. But a Samaritan stops and cares for him, taking him to an inn where the Samaritan pays for his care.

I once heard it said that if Jesus' parables don't shock or offend you, then you haven't understood them correctly. Now, does the story of the Good Samaritan feel shocking to you? The fact that the religious people not stopping to help might leave us wonder a little bit, but the fact that Samaritan was the one who stopped, might mean nothing to us. Because we are not the original audience that Jesus was speaking to, we have a completely different culture and maybe have no idea about why Jesus pick Samaritan, which means people of Samaria as the hero in the story.

Now, to understand better, we need to begin with a quick history between the Jews and the Samaritans. The Jews were considered to be God's chosen people. They were pure people from Israel, descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

The Samaritans on the other hand were descendants of Israelites who were left behind after the Assyrians conquered the Northern Kingdom. Assyrians were very definitely not Jews and over time, they inter-married with the Jews. So, the people in Samaria were half-Jews. They had their own subset of Jewish beliefs and their own temple. And they were considered by Jews as apostates to the faith, and not part of God's chosen people, because they are not pure.

In short, there is a whole history of hatred and actual racism between the Samaritans and Jews that continued for centuries down to Jesus' day. Samaritans were despised enemies of the Jews and vice versa, when Jews need to travel, they even willing to travel further so they don't need to pass the city of Samaria. And it is in this context that Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan - to a Jewish expert on the law.

Now imagine his original listeners hearing the story. A man is robbed, beaten, and left for dead. A priest comes along, surely this will be the hero of the story. But, the priest passes by without helping. Then, a Levite comes along, a Levite is a temple helper. Surely, he will

help. But this man too passes by on the other side without helping. Then a third man comes along, and this one stops to help the poor man lying on the side of the road. He does what is right, he stops and he helps. And this man was... a Samaritan.

To the Jewish people of Jesus' day, this would have been shocking and offensive. In this story, a despised enemy of the Jews is made the hero. So, what can we possibly learn from this parable today you might ask?

Let's start by asking why the priest and Levite didn't stop to help the man who had been robbed and left for dead. Perhaps we can identify with these two men more than we think.

First, it could be dangerous to stop and help the man. Jericho is close to the Dead Sea and below sea level. Jerusalem is in the hill country. The route is about 17 miles long and is quite steep and dangerous. There are no settlements or towns on the way. The road is winding and there are lots of caves and rocks perfect for bandits to hide in or behind to ambush travelers along the way. Robberies were very common, and the journey was known to be dangerous. The priest and the Levite could very well be thinking that they could be the next victim if they were to stop and help. Or perhaps they think it is possible that the man lying there was just pretending to need help. Maybe his friends were behind the rocks or bushes just waiting to attack anyone who helps. Perhaps that would be enough to make us pass by, if we were there.

The priest and the Levite might also have decided not to help for another reason – purity. The condition of the man may have been difficult to discern from a distance. If he was dead, touching a dead body would make them ceremonially unclean and unable to fulfil their duties in the temple. So the safest way is to let someone else do it.

Or perhaps these two men might have been in a hurry. Maybe they had urgent business awaiting them and thought, "Someone else will help. I need to keep going."

When we read this passage, we often read into the inaction of the priest and Levite and think that they didn't care. It's very possible they felt bad for the man but for any of the reasons above decided they could not help. Maybe they said a prayer for him on their way by instead. And yes prayer is a great first response. But sometimes praying shouldn't be our only response. Some situations require action.

Paul in his letter to the Colossians, thanks God for their charity and reminds them to, *"walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God."* Paul reminds them that they can pray and learn the teachings of Jesus, but they also need to get out there and help others.

As written in James 2: 17, *"Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead."*

Friends, how often are we worried, in a hurry and scared? How often do we let those things stop us from responding to genuine needs that God presents to us?

God has good works prepared for us to do. God has a path for us, and it is not always an easy one. It might sound simple to love. But the command to love invites us to do a lot of things that might be difficult, inconvenient, and not quite match up with our human logic.

The Samaritan had every reason to avoid this severely injured Jewish man. It's very possible that that very same Jewish man would not have helped him if the roles had been reversed. Centuries old hate and resentment could have stopped him. And yes, stopping could have placed him in danger as well. And maybe he too had things to do. But he didn't use any of those excuses. And he helped in every way that he could.

The Samaritan takes on a great degree of personal risk to help the stranger. He could be attacked by bandits. He could be cheated by the innkeeper. But he takes on these risks because he acts as if his own life were the one in danger. This is Jesus' best example of what it might mean to be a neighbour, to *"love your neighbour as yourself."*

So now, who is our neighbour? In his parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus shows us that even enemies can prove to be neighbours and that compassion and love have no boundaries.

Our neighbours are not just those we are close to, friends or relatives. They are not just those who believe what we believe or who live like we live. Our neighbours are also those who are different, strangers, those we prefer to keep on the margins, outcasts, and yes, even those we perceive as enemies.

Those who were foreigners could become neighbours, those who were criminals could become neighbours, even good people could become our neighbours. We don't decide ourselves who is our neighbour. Even though we, for example, at the first place choose the neighbourhood we want to live in, over time people can move, neighbours can change, and people's behaviour also can change.

Friends, eternal Life is an inheritance of God reserved for those who love Him. But we cannot say we love God if we refuse to show mercy to people. Our love for one another truly reveals our love for God. To show mercy and be a neighbour to the needy is the act of that love.

As King David closes his psalm by saying, *"God leads the humble in what is right and teaches the humble his way. All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his decrees."* Jesus in his parable and ministry shows one cannot hate another human being and still claim to love God. Our love for God and man is best expressed in showing mercy to people in need. Let us show mercy wholeheartedly starting here, starting today.

Amen.