

## **The Stories Jesus Loved To Tell: The Good Samaritan**

Luke 10:25-37

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For the next five weeks we will be preaching a series on the parables. Our reading for today is from the gospel of Luke – the story of the Good Samaritan. Listen with me for the word of God.

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Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?”

He answered, “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.”

And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, “Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.”

Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'

In 1884, a schoolteacher named Edwin A. Abbott published a novel satirizing Victorian culture in England. The novel was called *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*.

The story is about a two dimensional world populated by geometric figures. The narrator of the story is a square, whose name is...wait for it: Square. Square describes what life is like in the two dimensional world that he and the other "people" of Flatland inhabit.

A little bit into the story, things get interesting when Square gets his world turned upside down upon meeting a character named Sphere...who just so happens to be three-dimensional.<sup>1</sup> Needless to say, meeting Sphere is a startling revelation. Square does not have the language or the experience to comprehend this new reality represented by Sphere. The world he thought he knew – where the rules and his purpose were clear – is forever changed. The new world he stumbled upon forces him to revisit old assumptions; to adjust his purpose; to think in fresh ways.

When Jesus teaches with parables, whether he is teaching his disciples, or the crowds, or the Pharisees – or, two thousand years later, us – the experience is similar to that of Square meeting Sphere.

Parables are what Jesus uses to describe the Kingdom of God – a reality that is so much different and so much more full than the limited capacity we have to understand our world.

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There is an old saying that every preacher has about two or three sermons in them which they package differently depending on the Sunday.

Jesus' had one – he came to proclaim the coming of God's kingdom.

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Dr. Stan Saunders (Professor of New Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary), and his class on the parables, for this reference to E.A. Abbott's book.

Jesus preached that sermon constantly in his ministry.

He preached it through his life – where he embodied the reality of God’s kingdom in the ways he reached out to those on the margins, healed the sick, comforted the broken-hearted, granted forgiveness to sinners, performed miracles, and turned over tables.

Jesus preached the sermon in the ways he led and nurtured the faith in his disciples who followed him.

And Jesus preached the sermon in the parables he told – about lost coins, and lost sheep, and lost sons. About weeds and wheat, and buried talents, and grumbling field hands working in the vineyard.

Jesus taught in parables because in so doing he could use the language that is familiar to us to describe a world of which we only get a glimpse.

When we read or hear Jesus’ parables we often think that Jesus tells them in order to make a “point.” We are used to interpreting parables as if they are intended to make some sort of moral claim. And, the way we do it, usually, that moral claim, or point, is relatively self-evident from a quick reading or hearing of the parable. I’ve heard and taught many a Bible study that treats parables this way.

But the biblical scholar CH Dodd says that the purpose of Jesus’ parables is to “leave the mind in sufficient doubt about [their] precise application in order to tease [our brains] into active thought.”

Let me read that quote again: the purpose of Jesus’ parables is to “leave the mind in sufficient doubt about [their] precise application in order to tease [our brains] into active thought.”

Rather than reading parables with a goal to quickly figure out the point, what I am suggesting is that Jesus taught in parables in order to do something more. I believe Jesus taught in parables so that we might begin to grow comfortable with the strangeness of this new reality that is God’s kingdom.

Parables reveal a dimension of the world that God intends that we might miss if we just accepted the world the way that we are used to seeing it.

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The trouble with a parable as familiar as the Good Samaritan is that we've heard it so much it's hard to have many active thoughts.

We know the story – the lawyer stands to test Jesus, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Instead of answering the lawyer's question, Jesus asks him what the Scripture says. “To love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind. And to love your neighbor as yourself.”

And then the lawyer – because he is a lawyer and he can't stop until he is ahead – pushes Jesus because he wanted to justify himself: “And just who is my neighbor?”

That's the question that launches Jesus into the parable.

It's a classic story:

One crisis event (the man gets beaten up by robbers along the dangerous road from Jerusalem to Jericho).

A three-fold series of encounters: by the priest (who passes by), the Levite (a tribe of people who were bound to the same purity laws and the Priests and who typically followed their lead) who also passed the wounded man by, and the Samaritan – a group of people at odds with the Jews...people who would be considered sell-outs, with whom no Jew would ever interact. The Samaritan not only stopped to take care of the wounded man – he provided for him by writing the inn-keeper what was essentially a blank check (“take care of him and let me know how much more it costs and I'll pay”).

And then there is a neat and tidy ending. Jesus gets the man who asked the question that provoked his story to answer it: “which of

these three was a neighbor to the one who fell into the hands of the robbers?" Jesus asks. "Go and do likewise."

So what does Jesus mean?

One of the early Church Fathers, Augustine, interprets this parable as an allegory.

He sees the traveller on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho as Adam (the representative of humankind). He descends from Jerusalem – the lost paradise – to Jericho, the fallen world.

The robbers are evil spirits that deprive him of virtue and immortality.

The Priest and the Levite represent the Law and the prophets – but are unable to help.

The Samaritan is Christ. The inn where the wounded traveller stays is the church – where oil and wine...the sacraments...heal the traveller's wounds. The inn-keeper represents the apostles who continue to care for the wounded man until the return of the Samaritan – which is the second coming of Christ.<sup>2</sup>

Another way to interpret what Jesus means is to ask what about the Kingdom of God might this parable reveal?

Both the Priest and the Levite have their reasons for passing by the man who is half-dead on the side of the road. We often view the Priest and the Levite as callous and indifferent, but in reality they would more likely feel pulled between two, competing commandments: to love their neighbor on the one hand, and to avoid contracting ritual impurity by touching a dead (or half-dead) body on the other.

To our 21<sup>st</sup> century ears that may sound like an obvious choice, but think of it more like a choice between your heart and your head. For the Priest to do his job he had to be ritually pure. People were depending on him. He wasn't just pulled by two commandments – he was pulled

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<sup>2</sup> This description of Augustine's allegorical interpretation is found in Barbara E. Reid's book, *Parables for Preachers* (Year C), pp. 16-17.

between the needs of this one traveller and the needs of crowd of people to whom he had made a promise to care.

I suspect that we have all felt pulled between two competing commandments at some point.

To do right by a client or to do right by the company?

To provide for our own child or to seek the welfare of all children?

To help the person who stops us on the sidewalk and asks us for a hot meal or to serve lunch at the Urban Ministries Center?

To give our heart and soul to a patient or to compartmentalize our emotions so that we have energy for the fight against the disease?

To welcome the immigrant or the stranger or to err on the side of security?

I'm not sure there are cut and dry answers to these difficult choices – and I don't think Jesus is suggesting there are, either.

I think what Jesus intends to reveal in the telling of this parable is that in the Kingdom of God, the choices we make are not because we are trying to justify ourselves...like the lawyer wanted to do...but to honor God – who is reflected in the faces of those whom God puts in our path.

It's not about asking who is our neighbor.

That is a question for Squares.

It is about being a neighbor.

