

# Not Who, But How

Luke 10:25-37

July 15, 2007

Rev. Chris Cadenhead

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On most Sundays our Scripture readings are selected from something called the Common Lectionary. The Lectionary is nothing more than a schedule of Scripture readings that provides a suggestion of both Old and New Testament passages for each Sunday of the Christian year. I was excited when, in preparation for this Sunday, I turned to the lectionary and found that the gospel reading was the parable of the Good Samaritan. I was excited for a couple of reasons. For one thing, tomorrow begins our annual Vacation Bible School. The theme for this year's VBS is "The Parables." And according to the schedule of the week – a schedule that was set months ago – what should be the first parable we will study on tomorrow night but the parable of the Good Samaritan! Don't call that a coincidence; call it Providence.

But second, I was excited because the parables – especially those parables that appear in Luke – are my favorite texts from which to preach. I would much rather be given the chance to work with a good clever story like this than to have to preach on, say, the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of Leviticus where we get a detailed list of instructions about what to do with infectious skin diseases. Now, Leviticus 13 and all the rest of the Bible is just as much Holy Scripture to us as Luke 10. But the parable of the Good Samaritan is, well, more engaging, more creative, and thus more fun to preach from here in the middle of the summer when the days are long and hot and crowd at church usually slim.

At least, that's what I used to think. But then I sat down and actually read this parable closely, and I discovered all over again that there is nothing easy or simple about it. Jesus is often called the Master Teacher, and here we can see why, because he has told us a story that forces us to think in terms that defy any easy explanation. It's not that Jesus is trying to confuse us. Jesus came to reveal the Father's purposes, not to conceal them. It's just that the Father's purposes are bigger than ours. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord (Isaiah 55:8). God has always been in the business of shattering our simple expectations.

That's certainly what he does in Luke 10. We read that an expert in the Law of Moses approached Jesus one day. Here is someone who knows his Bible backwards and forwards. If there is anybody who should be familiar with what God is up to, it should be him: he's read all

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about it. Which is why we ought to be suspicious about the question he asked Jesus. “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” For the religious expert to ask that is kind of like an IRS agent asking whether he can take a certain tax deduction or a doctor asking whether its healthy to smoke. Of course, Luke in his telling of this event is right on top of that. He tells us that this question wasn’t really a genuine question. This religious expert wasn’t really interested in eternal life; he was only interested in testing Jesus. All he wanted to do was find out whether Jesus fit into what he already knew was true.

But remember, Jesus is the Master Teacher so he did what any good rabbi would do. He responded to the lawyer’s question by asking a question of his own. “What is written in the Law?” he asked. “How do you read it?” Jesus isn’t interested in doling out simple facts or easy formulas. He is interested in lived faith. So he forces this lawyer to wrestle, to reflect, to deal in a deeper way with the Scriptures he has already learned.

“Well”, says the lawyer I am sure with a confident look in his eye, “that’s simple enough. The Bible says I am supposed to love the Lord my God with all my heart and soul and strength and mind, and I am supposed to love my neighbor as myself.”

“Good answer” says Jesus. “Now, go and do just that and you will live.” The lawyer has passed the test. But still he is not satisfied. Remember, he came to do the testing, not to be tested. So, still insisting on forcing Jesus into one of his preconceived categories of what a good religious person is supposed to be like, the lawyer counters with a question of his own.

“And who, exactly, is my neighbor?” he asks.

What came next left him – as it still leaves us – scratching his head. For instead of doling out a simple answer or an easy formula, Jesus tells a story:

A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho when he was attacked by robbers, beaten to a pulp, and then left for dead. That should come as no surprise, for the road from Jerusalem to Jericho was notoriously dangerous. Rugged as it was, with long isolated stretches, there were plenty of places for thugs to hide.

Now, it came to pass that some time later another passer-by happened up on the poor fellow. And not just any passer-by, mind you. This guy was a priest. He belonged to the holiest

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class of people in all Israel. It was his vocation to speak to God on behalf of the people and to speak to the people on behalf of God. If you're lying in a ditch half-dead how much luckier could you be than to have God's representative come along?

Well, as it turns out, it's not so lucky after all, because a priest is bound by certain holiness codes. Among them, he is forbidden to touch a corpse. Doing so would defile him and disqualify him for his priestly duties. From where he stands he can't tell if this guy is dead or alive, so out of prudence the priest passed by on the other side of the road.

Some time later another passer by came along. This time it was a Levite. In Jesus' day, the Levites were basically priest wanna-be's. They claimed to be descendents of the priestly tribe of Israel, but due to some political changes a few centuries back they had been excluded from full admission to the priesthood. But that didn't stop them from trying. They went out of their way to live by the holiness codes of the day, so if the priest hadn't bothered to stop and help you can be assured this Levite wasn't about to do so.

Meanwhile the poor fellow is lying there in a pool of spittle and blood. When a third passer by happens along. Now so far the story has unfolded pretty much according to our expectations. We aren't surprised that someone would be attacked on this desolate stretch of road. And though we may be somewhat offended by it there is some reason to understand why the first two folks would fail to get involved. But nothing we've heard so far can prepare us for what is about to happen. For the third man is a Samaritan.

Jews hated Samaritans with a passion that dated back several hundred years. Samaritans had Jewish blood in their veins, but they had intermarried with pagans, had adopted suspect religious practices, ate un-kosher foods, and even set up their own holy site on Mt. Gerizim and refused to sacrifice at the Jerusalem temple. Samaritans were to Jews what Serbs are to Albanians, what Shia are to Sunni, what skater dudes are to jocks, what secular humanists are to religious fundamentalists. If you were a Jew, you wanted nothing to do with a Samaritan. If you were a Jew the only thing worse than getting beat up on a desolate stretch of road and thrown aside in a ditch would be getting beat up on a desolate stretch of road and thrown aside in a ditch and having to depend on a Samaritan to save you.

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Which, as Jesus tells the story, is exactly what happened. Against all odds, the Samaritan got down off his donkey, dressed the man's wounds, carried him to the nearest inn, and apparently even stayed with him through the night to begin nursing him back to health. The last person you would expect to be the hero of the story, the last person you would want to be the hero of the story, ends up being the hero of the story.

Like I said, God is in the business of shattering our expectations.

So, what is the point of this strange tale? As with many of Jesus' parables, there are probably many points to be made from it. But rather than attempt an exhaustive list of them, let me say what I don't think the point is – and this may sound strange at first. I don't think the point of the story is to get too caught up with the identity of the Samaritan. We are so drawn to the surprising twist in this story that this is where we tend to focus. But I am afraid – in the words of the proverbial saying – that is to get so focused on the trees that we miss the forest. Jesus didn't tell the story to convince the lawyer that Samaritans really aren't that bad after all. The point of the story is not so much that the Samaritan was a Samaritan; the point of the story is that the Samaritan was a neighbor to someone in need.

Part of our fascination with the identity of the Samaritan is that we, like the lawyer, are still trying to figure out who our neighbor is and who our neighbor isn't. You will note that one of our first interpretive techniques when we approach this story is to try and figure out who the modern day equivalent would be to the Samaritan. If Jesus were telling this story in today's terms would he tell the parable of the good Serb, or the good skater dude, or the good secular humanist? Perhaps so. But if so, it would be for the same purposes that Jesus pursues in the original version, which is to shatter expectations and make us see reality in a different light. Jesus told the lawyer about the Good Samaritan as a way of getting past the lawyer's assumptions, and there-by to get by his defenses, and there-by to redefine the question.

You see, the lawyer came asking "Who is my neighbor?" But that's not the question for which Jesus leads us to an answer – at least not directly. Or, maybe it would be better to say that by choosing a Samaritan for the role of hero in this story, Jesus makes the answer to that question so self-obvious that it doesn't need to be asked. The neighbor, simply put, is anyone.

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To attempt any distinctions or definitions beyond that is to be guilty of the same crime for which the lawyer was convicted in his asking of the question in the first place. To spend our time trying to figure out who the neighbor is and, by implication, who the neighbor isn't is to completely miss the point of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ. We shouldn't be any more surprised that the neighbor in this story showed up as a hated Samaritan than we should be surprised that God showed up as dark-skinned, first century, middle-eastern carpenter. We shouldn't be any more offended that life-saving help in this story came from a despised half-breed than we should be offended that salvation came from a despised criminal charged with blasphemy and treason and left hanging on bloody cross near the town garbage dump. Both God and the neighbor have a way of showing up in the most unexpected places.

I think that's why – as surprising as the identity of the Samaritan is – Jesus doesn't really dwell on that detail. It's not the Samaritan's ethnicity that warrants attention; it is his behavior towards the man in need. Please note that by the end of this passage the hero of the story is no longer identified as a Samaritan, but rather as the one who showed mercy. Jesus challenges our cherished assumptions by telling us a story in which neighborliness is no longer defined by tribe or tongue, by social status or school zone, by race or even by religion. Neighborliness is defined by action. The neighbor isn't the one who looks a certain way or lives in a certain place or shares certain commonalities; the neighbor is the one who acts like Jesus.

Over in Acts 10, we read a story in which Peter the Apostle is called to preach the gospel to the household of a Gentile named Cornelius. Peter is blown away to discover that not only does God desire to take the message of salvation to the Gentiles, but that the Gentiles are receptive to that message. Standing there in Cornelius' house, Peter utters words that must have been difficult for his Jewish lips to utter: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right."

Neighborliness is about action, not identity.

The question, then, is not who is my neighbor? Jesus answered that question when he died to bring life to the whole world. The question is, am I being a neighbor? Am I showing mercy? Am I embodying a cross-shaped way of life? Am I willing to get down off my donkey –

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or out of my luxury SUV - to share sacrificially of my wine and oil – or whatever resources God has placed at my disposal – that a broken and bleeding world may know a little healing? Or do I pass by on the other side?

The good news for us is that God did not. In Jesus Christ he came down out of heaven and put on our broken flesh. And through us, he still wants to do the same.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.