

## Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Today's gospel reading is my favorite story in the entire Bible. In it, we find a story within the story. First, we have the "expert of the law" in conversation with Jesus, and then, we have the parable of the Good Samaritan. Each in their own right offer us a lot to ponder and explore.

Let's start with the parable. We heard of a man who was coming from Jerusalem. We know nothing else about him. We don't know if he was Jewish or gentile, rich or poor, old or young, or anything else. We do know he was robbed, beaten, and half dead. Then three different people passed by. First a priest and then a Levite. As Jesus is telling this story, the next person that the Jewish listeners would immediately think about would be... an Israelite. You see, the Jewish scholar and New Testament scholar, Amy-Jill Levine reminds us that Jewish people generally fit into one of three Biblical groups: priests who descended from Aaron (the brother of Moses), Levites who descended from Levi (Aaron's ancestor), and Israelites who descended from the children of Jacob other than Levi. So, in the parable, the listener would naturally expect the helper to be a fellow Jewish person.

Instead, it was a Samaritan, and while Samaritans are also descendants from Aaron, Samaritans and other Jewish people did not get along at all. They were deeply divided socially, religiously, and politically. It all goes back to the division of Israel after King Solomon's death. You see, after the kingdom was divided into north and south, the northern part was conquered

by the Assyrian empire. Over time, the people there started to intermarry with foreigners, which resulted in a mixed population with blended Jewish and non-Jewish rituals. Over time, Samaritans intermarried and developed distinct religious practices, including a temple on Mount Gerizim. Jews worshipped in Jerusalem. Both groups saw the other as heretics. The division was deep—and sometimes violent. Jewish forces tried to destroy the Samaritan temple, and the Samaritans threw bones into the temple in Jerusalem to make it ritually impure.

Needless to say, it was one of the most entrenched ethnic-religious divisions in Jesus' time. This division was similar to the divisions we see between Sunni and Shia Muslims, or between North and South Korea, or between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland. So, for Jesus to say that a dirty, no good, rotten heretic –that disgusting pig of a human; that unfaithful, heretical apostate– that that Samaritan would be the one that they should emulate his compassion, well, (hawk a luge-e and spit). NEVER! They would rather die than have *that* person look at them.

And even though we might not have the exact grudge against another as the Samaritans and Jews had, it sure does make me stop in my tracks. After all, would you let Donald Trump save your life? Or, if you're on the other side of the political chasm, would you let Joe Biden save your life? It gets me thinking about the ways I'm so entrenched in my tribe, my people, my family, my nation, and my in-group. Far too often we dehumanize others and make caricatures of them with labels so that we can reject them. We label others to dismiss them: "Oh, she's just being dramatic," or "He's one of those

people.” These shortcuts let us ignore suffering and distance ourselves from compassion.

Yet, with this parable, Jesus is stepping into the more fraught division of the time to reach across to the Jewish people’s sworn enemy to not ignore differences but rather to dignify the other and reframe holiness.

You see, the expert of the law asked, “who is my neighbor?” The lawyer wants to know who he was responsible for and who he is commanded to love. But by the end of the parable, Jesus reframed the question to say, “which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor?” And notice that the lawyer could not even bring himself to say, “the Samaritan,” rather he said “the one who showed him mercy” – boy, do bitter divisions remain stubbornly deep. As Rev. Dr. David Lose notes, Jesus “redefines neighbor not in terms of race, religion, or proximity, but in terms of vulnerability; that is, whoever is in need is your neighbor.”

Earlier we heard, that to live we are invited to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind and your neighbor as yourself. Mercy, compassion, and love are the essence of our Christian calling. And we are called to this not because God said so, but because God loves our neighbor. You see, in our baptism, just like in Devin’s baptism moments ago, God’s love was poured out for us. In baptism we are reminded that God loves you and that nothing you have done, will do, or could do can separate you from that love. You are enough, and you have enough. And if God says that about you, about me, about Devin—then we are called to love others as deeply as we have been loved.

One last story: A few years back there was a story about a twelve-year-old Palestinian boy. This boy was shot and killed by an Israeli soldier during a street fight near his home in the West Bank. The boy was taken to an Israeli hospital, and he died after two days. His parents, who are Palestinian, made the decision to allow his organs to be harvested for transplant ... to Israelis. Six people receive his heart, lungs, and kidneys, including a two-month-old infant. The boy's mother, Ablu, said, "[Although] my son has died. Maybe he can give life to others." These parents stepped into the compassion of God. They looked their enemies in the eye, and they discovered eternal life.<sup>1</sup>

*That* is what today's reading is about. How do we find eternal life? We show compassion – even to those we call enemies. We discover God's presence in the people we least expect. We love God, our neighbor, and ourselves. Go and do likewise. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Wallace, James. A. *Feasting on the Word. Year C. Volume 3.* "Luke 10:25-37, Homiletical Perspective." p 241-243.