

The story we are about to read is probably the most well known parable in the Bible. It is one of those stories which has made its way into our common language in our society. Any time that one does a good deed they are usually called a Good Samaritan. There is an RV club called the Good Sam club. So let us listen once again to this story and how it can challenge us and our actions.

Read Luke 10:25-37

You may have noticed this week the theme of this week's Vacation Bible School. The theme is "Putting the story of the Good Samaritan into action." Each day of this week anyone who attends will not be a mere learner but will be guided in how to put their faith into action in fun and engaging ways.

On Monday of this week, they will be learning about this story which we just read. On Tuesday the participants will be able to make stepping stones and a few bird houses with donations going to Habitat for Humanity to help people move from substandard housing into a new and quality home. A home which the homeowner helps to build and also pay the mortgage.

On Wednesday of this week they will have the opportunity to volunteer in the thrift store for PATH in York. The manager of the store was very excited to hear from us. She told me that the store is in need to a deep cleaning and they usually hear from a church willing to volunteer and she had not received that call. Until this church called.

But on Wednesday you will not only find volunteers from this church volunteering at PATH. If you find yourself on Crawford Rd. in Rock Hill you may be one of the volunteers inside a Habitat for Humanity home doing some inside construction work as well as doing some painting.

On Thursday you are encouraged to bring your car or dog by this church where volunteers will be washing animals and vehicles. Usually when you find a group of young people washing cars the money is going to pay for transportation so that they can go some place special and fun. But on Thursday here people will be washing cars and boats and dogs in order to donate money to PATH to help people pay for transportation so that they can go to the doctor or the grocery store or wherever they need to go. Many people do not have vehicles so they need to pay someone to take them.

On Friday you will find VBS participants taking tea and lemonade and board games to a local assisted living facility where they will play games with the residents. Don't feel like any of these activities are reserved for young people or for VBS volunteers. Any of these activities are open to any of us to support with our time or donations. Invite your neighbors to participate.

Invite your neighbors? Wait a second. I think we heard something about neighbors in the story we read today. Jesus tells this story about a man who was travelling along a road when he is beat up and left for dead. But he is a lucky man because while he is laying there two church workers come along the road. "Thank God," he must have been saying. Two preachers, otherwise known as a priest and a Levite, come walking along.

If one is beat up and found in a ditch, the best people to come along at that time would be committed church people. But guess what? When each of these church workers sees this man in the ditch they walk to the other side. Why would Jesus tell a story where the slackers in the story are the churchy people? Shouldn't he be telling stories where the righteous and upstanding church people are the heroes in the story? Why would he invent a story in which the church people are the disinterested ones?

Could it be that church people are so focused on ourselves and our salvation that we miss the needs of the people around us? Could it be that church people are so fearful of the people that they don't know that they would rather shun them rather than get to know them and their needs? Could it be that church people are so focused on what we think is important that we are missing what it is that God thinks is important?

But then this story gets even more damning of us. Because the hero in the story that Jesus tells turns out to be a Samaritan. Jews and Samaritans did not get along. Jews and Samaritans disagreed about which town was to be the center of their faith and Jews considered Samaritans to be half breeds.

When I was seminary I interned at a Presbyterian Church in a town which I will not reveal for this story. For about three months I spent the summer with a Presbyterian pastor at this large church whose structure soared over the town. One day in our conversation with one another something was said about a bi-racial child. He said to me, bi-racial? Don't you mean half-breed? I could not believe my ears.

Samaritans were the people that Jews considered to be less than them. Half-breeds if you will. But in this story that Jesus tells the Samaritan turns out to be the hero in the story. The one that Jews were told to not associate with turns out to be, guess what, the one who acts in the way that is pleasing to God.

There are lots of opportunities to be in service this week. There are other ways that people in this church are involved in serving. There are lots of ways that people in this church are involved in the community serving others and they do not make a big deal about it. They just do it.

This story challenges us to not be restrictive, though, it who we are to reach out to and serve. The lawyer who asks the question, “who is my neighbor?” wanted to know the boundaries. Who do I need to help and who do I not need to help? Do I help the person who can pay me back or the one who cannot?

Do I help the person who votes like I do in presidential elections or people who vote opposite from me? Do I help the person who has the same moral standards as I do or the person who does things that I think are immoral and wrong? Do I help the person who looks like me or the person who doesn't look like me?

The thing is. Jesus does not answer the lawyer's question and he does not answer our question. It turns out that the neighbor in the story is anyone who is in need. The criteria that we put out there about who is deserving and who is not is broken down.

But Jesus by telling this story also breaks down the walls about who can help us. Are there people that we refuse to allow to help us? Are there categories of people that we have labeled in some way as people who are unable to assist us in any way?

The other night I was with a group of young adults from this church and I asked them to share a moment when they have seen the faith community at its best. One person shared his answer to that question. He said I think the time when the Christian faith community acted its best was the picture I saw from Egypt.

The picture he described is one that maybe you have seen. As Christians and Muslims together protested the actions of their government in Egypt, it came time for one of the ritualistic Muslim prayers. But what happened next was pretty amazing. As these Muslim men bowed down to pray in the streets, the Christians circled around them, faced outward, and protected the Muslims so that they could pray in safety.

Who is my neighbor? Imagine you are asking that question to Jesus. What do you think Jesus would say to you?

Be careful in asking that question though.

Jesus just might reveal to you that your neighbor is the person or group that you most despise. AMEN.

-Given: July 14, 2013 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)

Prayer of Confession

They may not be beaten down or lying by the road, but there are people we pass by, Watching God. Some are family and friends we take so much for granted we cannot see how we have stripped them of our love and compassion.

Others are neighbors: who have been left half-dead by crushing work;
who have fallen into the hands of despair; who have been abandoned by all those who walked on by them. Many are strangers, people we don't know, but quickly judge: they are weak, or poor, or the enemy or because they remind us of whom we once were, or could become.

Rescue us from the power of our sins, Righteous One of all generations.

Pour out your justice on us, rather than your judgment,
that we would be moved with pity, and spurred to action;
that we would hear of the hope that is ours,
and share it with our sisters and brothers;
that we would shower mercy on all we meet,
even as we have received forgiveness for our sins
through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

Prayers of the People

Eternal God, Rescuer of the weak: given every reason to judge us,
you seek justice for us. You stand with the poor in the ditches
where we have discarded them. You plant your Word of truth
in the One who gives us unexpected answers.

Jesus Christ, Word of Truth: you will not pass us by, but stoop to lift us up
and carry us out of our pain. You love the faithful enough to tell us stories
which will shatter our complacency and send us forth to carry mercy to others.