

“Who is My Neighbor?”

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Scriptures: Deuteronomy 30:9–14; Psalm 25 ; Colossians 1:1–14; Luke 10:25–37

Family feuds are part of my heritage. The Ryden side of my family came over from Sweden in the late 19th century. My mom’s side of the family has been in the US for a good bit longer and has a bit of notoriety. I am a Hatfield, as in one half of the great Appalachian feud-ers. Although we can’t trace our family line directly from the feud, the story is that my mother’s side of the family did come from those West Virginia hills where the events of the feud took place, and so I am going to claim it as part of my story. So remember that if you go to that Hatfield and McCoys Dinner show - that’s my heritage you’re laughing at!

For us to more greatly appreciate our Gospel reading for today, we need to get into a little bit of history over another family feud, this one within a single family. The story begins with the troubled lineage of David and Solomon, kings over united Israel. The twelve tribes, after those two kings, split into two kingdoms, the Northern Kingdom, whose capital would be Samaria, and the Southern Kingdom , whose capital would be Jerusalem. When the Assyrians came conquering, the Northern Kingdom fell and the Southern Kingdom held. Part of the way the Assyrians conquered was to populate the conquered area with their own people, and so the land of Samaria became a land where worship of Yahweh was intermingled with the worship of pagan gods.

And so when the Samaritans came calling to help the Judeans rebuild the Temple at Jerusalem, after the Southern kingdom had experienced its own defeat at the hands of Babylon, the builders refused, because they deemed that Samaritan worship had been compromised. The Judeans say that the Samaritans are not worthy to help rebuild God's Temple.¹

Things get worse from there. When the oppression of God's people in Jerusalem gets so bad that the Judeans decide to revolt against their Greek overlords, the Samaritans, who had by that time started identifying Yahweh with the Greek god Zeus,² would join with the Greeks instead of the Jewish siblings. The Judeans, in turn, would destroy the Samaritan Temple at Mount Gerizim.³ These latest debacles took place between 150 and 100 BC.

Into this cacophony of bad blood, the Son of God was born. And it is interesting to note how his own life intersected with Samaritans, and not just in the stories that he told. One of the first places Jesus goes in John's gospel is to a well in a Samaritan village to speak with a woman who becomes one of the very first deliverers of the Gospel. Just a few verses before our Gospel reading from Luke, Luke shares a story of Jesus entering a Samaritan village. When the village rejects him, Jesus' disciples James and John, the hot-head brothers, ask if they should call fire down from heaven to destroy the town.⁴ In their minds, I am sure these Samaritans acted just as expected. How would they have done anything different than reject God's Son. They'd been rejecting God for centuries, why would they change now? A hefty helping of fire

¹ Ezra 4:3; <https://www.franciscanmedia.org/ask-a-franciscan/the-rift-between-jews-and-samaritans/>

² Wright and Bird, *The New Testament in Its World*, 144.

³ <https://www.franciscanmedia.org/ask-a-franciscan/the-rift-between-jews-and-samaritans/>

⁴ Luke 9:51ff

from heaven is better than they deserve! But Jesus rebukes them because James and John's cure is worse than the disease.

And now we get to the parable many of us know so well. Maybe we can start to see why the lawyer who was questioning Jesus can't bring himself to utter the word Samaritan.

The lawyer... this poor guy. Have you ever asked a question and then instantly regretted it? Just one of those questions you want to immediately reel back in. This lawyer, though, seems to think he's pretty smart. And to his credit, what he gets right, he gets right. He does better than most of Jesus' conversational sparring partners. When Jesus turns his own question back upon him, he does well. His answer to the question of what must be done to inherit eternal life mirrors Jesus' own distillation of the law and the prophets. This lawyer is a Great Commandment sort of guy. That's good!

But then he blows it. The text says that his next question, the one that prompts the parable, is done out of a desire to justify himself. "Who is my neighbor?" Then the story. A priest and a Levite fail where a Samaritan does what is good. Jesus says that all of us, that lawyer included, should go and do likewise. And he makes the hero of the the story the one person the lawyer would be horrified to think of as his neighbor.

What can we learn from this parable? Well, I don't know that we will break any new ground today, but perhaps it is just good that we hear the story again. As we sit in a

world where our concept of neighbor gets ever smaller, we need a reminder of the simple message of the way of being in the world to which Jesus calls his followers.

So reflect with me on this parable for just a moment. As he so often does, Jesus reveals what is in the heart of the one with whom he is speaking. If someone comes to Jesus with faith, it will be revealed. If they come to him with bad motives, like the desire to justify oneself, that too will be revealed.

How many of us ask questions of God where our chief desire is not to know him or his will, but to justify ourselves? The lawyer, in true analytical fashion, wants to make sure he's gotten all his bases covered so that he can inherit eternal life. He is a smart guy who knows God's law, and so he knows that part of the price of admission is the love of his neighbor. He wants to make sure he is clear on the terms of the deal. This is a person who doesn't just click through the terms and conditions of the software agreement. So he asks just how far that boundary of "neighbor" extends.

It's a natural question, one that we all have. Surely I don't have the capacity to love everyone. Surely I am not under that expectation. That would be impossible! From the way, again, the lawyer can't even bring himself to say the word Samaritan, we can probably assume the Samaritans were out of the neighbor category for him. From James and John's behavior at the Samaritan village, we can assume they would have agreed with the lawyer. I wonder if Jesus gave a glance over to James and John as he revealed that the hero in his story was a Samaritan. Perhaps they were learning along with the lawyer, along with us. If there is a boundary of who is and who isn't my neighbor, then I can get away with acting without love toward the people on the other side of that boundary. But Jesus refuses to draw any such line.

The answer to “who is my neighbor?” is the person we are trying to get out of loving by asking that question. The lawyer seeks to justify himself when he asks that question. James and John seek to justify themselves, that they are the good guys, when they show their desire to destroy a whole Samaritan village. So often, we like them, make decisions and judgements with our own self-justification in view. But friends, it is a basic tenet of our faith that we do not justify ourselves and the Justifier is the one who places the Samaritan as the hero of the story.

Who is the Samaritan to you? Who is the one that you assume is out of God’s reach? This is a question I think we can only answer for ourselves after a lot of honest prayer and reflection, but it is worth asking. If my own experience has taught me anything about that question, I would tell you to expect resistance to answering it. The way that Jesus’ parable so directly confronts the prejudices and internal workings of the lawyer shows us that we should not avoid that inquiry within ourselves. Who is the Samaritan to you? Don’t run from that question!

The Parable of the Good Samaritan invites us to have a broader imagination when it comes to relating to neighbors and strangers, friends and enemies in the world. Jesus shows us that something new is possible.

There is a sense in which the lawyer, James, and John have the correct assessment of the Samaritans. Theologically speaking, they had some serious issues. The mixing of pagan worship with the worship of the one true God was in no way acceptable. In John chapter 5, when Jesus speaks with the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus himself affirms that the Jews have it right when it comes to the worship of God.⁵ It is

⁵ John 5:22

not that Jesus doesn't recognize that the Samaritans have things mixed up... it's what he does with that information. He comes toward them, and invites his disciples to do the same, in love, even when they initially reject him.

Jesus has a broad enough imagination to see salvation coming to Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth.⁶ There are a lot of problems in that mission field that will need to be addressed, a lot of false and harmful beliefs that need to be corrected. But that doesn't happen when we who follow Jesus call down fire from heaven. It happens when we live like the Good Samaritan.

And of course, the lawyer, James, and John, in addition to being right about the Samaritans in one sense, are very wrong in another. They are wrong in thinking that Samaritans are out of the bounds of hope. They are wrong to assume they can peer into the heart of each and every Samaritan and know that they desire blasphemy and evil. Many, like that woman at the well, are ready to not only receive the good news of Jesus, but to share it with everyone they meet. There is an extent to which the enemy of the Samaritan, which the lawyer, James, and John have in mind, is simply an invention of their imagination.

It has become a profitable thing in our society, inside the Church and outside of it, to define ourselves by who our enemies are. If this person or this group of people are for something, I am against it. Depending on our media diet, we have a ready-made list of enemies ready for us to take down every morning as we drink our morning coffee. Whether we are told it is the immigrant or the stranger, the poor or the rich, the rural contrarian or the urban elitist, someone is ready to give you a whole list of

⁶ Acts 1:8

reasons why this or that person is your enemy and wants nothing more than to see you and your life destroyed. And if we are not careful in guarding our hearts, we eventually get to the point where we can't even bring ourselves to say their names, even if Jesus himself told us a story where they were the hero.

The Apostle Paul began as a persecutor of the church. Each one of us knows the darkness from which the good news of the gospel has saved us. We should be well acquainted with God's ability to turn even enemies into brothers and sisters. This is true of real enemies and those we make up for ourselves.

Jesus is asked the question of inheriting eternal life another time in Luke's gospel, this time by a rich young ruler. Their conversation reveals that the man is lacking one thing and Jesus tells him to do it - to sell all his possessions and give to the poor.⁷ We have a similar thing going on here with this self-justifying lawyer. He lacks the heart of the Good Samaritan and so Jesus ends the dialogue that began with a question about eternal life with a command: "Go and do likewise." Go and be like the Samaritan.

This is our command too, to look with the eyes of God upon our enemies, those that are real and those we've come to believe are our enemies because we've been told so, with love and the kingdom imagination that would see them reconciled to God and to us.

Now if you are thinking this sounds a bit "pie in the sky" and doesn't seem very realistic, I would tend to agree with you, it's just that Jesus commands it anyway. "Go

⁷ Luke 18:18ff

and do likewise,” he says. Have the heart of compassion that serves even the one who wishes you ill.

I am encouraged by our Old Testament reading today, which is a commentary on God’s Law, given to his people as they prepare to exit their desert wanderings: “For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will ascend to heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?’ Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?’ But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it.”⁸

We might be tempted to think the Samaritan command is too heady or idealistic for us, and yet it is right there. We may think it sounds all too dramatic and such opportunities will not come to us in our school, our job, our neighborhood. Don’t fall for those lies. God’s command is indeed not far off, but confronts us every day in the faces of those he has put in our lives to love.

I also want to encourage us that when we pursue this calling of living like Jesus did with regard to enemies, we will see fruit. Jesus doesn’t let up with this Samaritan stuff. When we see his last conversation with the Apostles in Acts, Jesus emphasizes the spreading of the Gospel, in Judea, Samaria, and to the end of the earth.⁹ Again, I like to think that Jesus may have given a sideways, smiling glance to James and John

⁸ Deut 30:11-14

⁹ Acts 1:8

when he told them that their mission was to go and give a message of life to Samaria, a far cry from the fire and brimstone they wanted to call down.

And the mission went well! The book of Acts talks of the Gospel spreading in Samaria three different times, including one extended story of Philip's mission there.¹⁰ Our work does not come back void. Where we desire to see destruction, God is desiring to bring about life in his name, and he is able to do so!

Don't let the parable of the Good Samaritan fall into the category of nice sentiment. Let it be a story that forms your imagination, for what is possible and for what work God calls you to do in his world. Identify those whom for you are the Samaritans in your life and pray for them! Pray for opportunities to show God's mercy and compassion towards them. And then take those opportunities! And above all, let us give thanks to God, for it was once we who were lost and enemies, and it is he who has found us and called us his own.

¹⁰ Johnson, Luke Timothy. *Sagra Pagina: The Gospel of Luke*, 173. Acts 8:1-14, 9:31, 15:3)