

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

The Other

Sunday, February 16

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A few years ago, Brandy and I went snow skiing with her brother in Park City, Utah. It was beautiful. I had not been skiing since I was a boy, but I thought I could pick it up quickly. Brandy and her brother Brad are great skiers, but I'm competitive and I thought I could hang with them.

The first thing we did was get our gear. I wanted the best. I wanted to look good on the slopes. So, I got hooked up with the best skis, goggles, boots, jacket, etc. I looked like a real skier.

Brandy signed me up for ski lessons and I was bit insulted. "Ski lessons? I don't need ski lessons!" Of course, the first thing I did in my lesson was fall flat on my behind! The instructor said, "Ok, our first lesson, sir, is how to fall correctly." That was not encouraging.

After the lesson the instructor told me to stay on the green slopes and avoid the blue or black slopes because they would be too advanced for me. Well, I met up with Brandy and Brad and the first thing they said to me was "We have a great blue slope for you to go down!"

I tried to forget what the instructor said. I mean, I didn't want to look like a wimp! So, we proceeded down the blue slope and my life began to flash before my eyes! Little kids were whizzing by me and Brandy and Brad were doing circles around me while I firmly kept my skis in the pie position to keep from falling off a cliff! I was freaking out! I couldn't ski that slope. But you know what? I looked good! I had the best gear on! I looked good, but I really wasn't a skier.

I tell you that story because quite often that is how many Christians approach their faith. They have the externals figured out. They look good. They have their leather-bound Bibles with their names on them. They drive to church on Sunday. They listen to Christian music. They don't cuss. But when you look deeper you notice they are really not living out the heart of the faith.

Why do you think Jesus got so angry at the religious leaders of his day? They were preoccupied with the externals – how they looked in public, how long their prayers were, the rules they were following. But their behavior showed they were not living out the heart of the faith. This is why Jesus told them to work on cleaning the inside of their cups instead of the outside.

It is easy for any of us to get preoccupied with the externals of our faith and forget what it truly means to be a follower of Jesus. Christ. This is why I would like to lift up one of the most well-known parables of Jesus in the world – the parable of the Good Samaritan. This great parable reminds us what it looks like to be a follower of Christ.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is, next to the parable of the Prodigal Son, the most well-known story Jesus told. And most of us think Jesus told the parable to get us to do some soul searching about what we would do if a stranger needed help. If we saw a stranger in a ditch, stranded on a highway, lying helpless in front of an oncoming train, would we risk our own wellbeing to help them? Do I have the stuff to be a Good Samaritan?

That's not a bad way to understand the parable, but it goes much deeper than that. In fact, I would say that the parable of the Good Samaritan is the most misunderstood parable Jesus told.

So, this morning lay aside everything you think you know about this parable, for I believe Jesus told this parable for us to ponder a critical question, a challenging question, a life changing question. It is a question that separates those who act like they are following Jesus and those who are truly following Jesus.

To get to this key question we have to understand the key word in this parable. It is Samaritan. I want you to hear that –Samaritan. This word does not mean much to us today, but to the Jews who heard Jesus speak the name Samaritan was a dirty word. Jews and Samaritans

did not get along at all. There were years and years of bad blood between them. To Jews Samaritans were half breeds, half Jewish and half something else. They were not pure Jews because they married people of other races, Samaritans brought in their own traditions to Judaism and this was unthinkable to a Jew.

So, let's just say there were not good feelings between Jews and Samaritans. A Samaritan represented the "other" person, the outsider, one who was less than, one to be afraid of, one to dislike.

To help you get a real feel for the animosity between Jews and Samaritans let me use some current categories. How do staunch Republicans feel about a staunch Democrat? How do conservative Christians and liberal Christians feel about each other? How do Georgia and Georgia Tech fans feel about each other? You get the picture.

But the implication of this parable also has to do with ethnicity too – how folks feel about those who are different racially – those from different countries – those of different religions.

So the question this amazing parable Jesus told is begging is to ask is this: Who is the "other" in your life? Who is different than you? Who thinks differently than you? Who is the person or the people whom you dislike? And would you be willing to help them and love them? Would you be willing to see them as God sees them?

It's a challenge, I know. But as we take a closer look at the parable today it will help us embrace the challenge.

The context of the parable is fascinating. The passage begins with a man who wanted to ask Jesus a question:

An expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" –Luke 10:25

The text says the man was trying to test Jesus. This man wasn't there to gain wisdom from Jesus. He had an agenda. He was an expert in Jewish law and wanted to see if Jesus believed the same thing he believed. He wasn't there to learn. He was there to see if Jesus was in his camp. Some things never change. Christians do this all the time today.

So the man tested Jesus by asking him in what in our vernacular would be "How do I get into heaven?" That's

not a bad question, but the question was all about him. His question should have been, "How do I live a life that is pleasing to God?" The focus of his question should have been God, not himself.

Nevertheless Jesus responded to the man. But he was clever about it. He knew what the man was up to. So Jesus responded by asking him a question:

"What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?" –Luke 10:26

In other words, Jesus was saying, "You're an expert in the law. You should know this? What does the law say?" He replied to Jesus by quoting what every Jew knew – the greatest commandment.

He answered, "'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, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" –Luke 10:27

This summed up the entire Hebrew Scriptures – love God with all that you are and all that you have and love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus responded by saying:

"You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live." –Luke 10:28

But the man would not give up easily and so he asked Jesus a follow up question:

...he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" –Luke 10:29

Adam Hamilton says that what the man was really asking was, "Who don't I have to love?" He was saying, "Okay, I hear you Jesus. Love my neighbor as myself. But, really? Who is my neighbor? Does that mean everybody? Surely, there is a limit to who I have to love, right Jesus? I mean, I don't have to love everybody, right?"

Jesus said, "I am glad you asked that. Let me tell you a story":

"A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead." –Luke 10:30

The road this victim was traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho was well known. It was well traveled. It is about 17 miles long. Back in Jesus' day robbers would often

hide in caves along this road and injure and rob travelers. Everyone knew about this road and how dangerous it was, so Jesus' listeners wouldn't have been surprised to hear about this poor victim.

But notice that Jesus didn't identify who the victim was. He doesn't tell us where he is from, what he does, or what he is like. Jesus said that he was just a man.

Why? Hamilton notes "Because that person could be any person in your life on any day." It could be your neighbor or co-worker. It could be the person who cut you off in traffic. It could be someone in your Sunday school class. It could be the cashier at the grocery store. It could be anyone who is in a ditch in life and needs help. And you know what? That man could be any one of us on any day. It could be us when we are in a ditch in life and we desperately need help. We need someone to help us out of the ditch

Then Jesus thickens the plot by mentioning this:

A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. –Luke 10:31-32

If Jesus were telling this story in our context today he might have put the story this way: "A United Methodist preacher walked by the man and said a prayer for him because he was on his way to an administrative board meeting. Then a chairman of a local church board walked by the man because she was on her way to a Bible study."

But Jesus shocks his audience by adding this to the story:

But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.' –Luke 10:33-35

Keep in mind that everyone Jesus was talking to was Jewish. So when Jesus introduced a Samaritan in the story the Jews probably gasped and thought, "A Samaritan would never help me and I would rather die than get help from a Samaritan!" Nevertheless it was the Samaritan, the enemy, the despised and rejected one,

who was moved with compassion and helped the man, a person who was probably his enemy.

See what Jesus did? It was the "other" person, the one who is disliked, the outsider, the one who is hated, who ends up being the one who helped the man.

It is the co-worker you can't stand who ends up being the only one who visited you in the hospital. It is the neighbor who annoys you who brings food to your house when a loved one dies. It is the car with a Trump sticker that stops and helps a stranded motorist with a Hillary sticker on his car. When this happens, you can't help but see the other person in a new way. You can't help but see the other as a neighbor, as a child of God, just like you. You realize that when we are cut we all bleed. When we are tickled, we all laugh. And when we are in pain, we all cry. We are all the same and we all need love.

So then Jesus turns to his tester and says, "So, based on that story how would you define your neighbor? Who was the neighbor in that story?"

The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

He couldn't even say "Samaritan."

If you do the math in this parable, one out of three people was willing to help the other – one out of three. That one Jesus calls his follower. That one looks for the other in life and helps them. Who is the other in your life who needs help? Are you the one?

You see quite often when you follow Jesus you will be the only one. You will stand alone. Because the things that Jesus calls us to do are not always popular. Let's not forget that Jesus was killed for what he said and did. His love was so radical and offensive, so boundless and limitless that the world could not take it. We could not tolerate it. We nailed it to a cross.

It is not always easy to do what Jesus calls us to do. If you don't believe me let me tell you about a famous experiment that was conducted with seminary students. "Researchers gathered a group of ministry students in a classroom and told them that each of them had an assignment. Their assignment was to record a talk about the Parable of the Good Samaritan. The thing was, the recordings were going to be done in a building on the other side of the campus, and because of a tight schedule they needed to hurry to that building.

“Unbeknownst to the students, on the path to the other building the researchers had planted an actor to play the part of a man in distress, slumped in an alley, coughing and suffering. The students were going to make a presentation about the Good Samaritan. But what would happen, the researchers wondered, when they actually encountered a man in need? Would they be Good Samaritans? Well, no, as a matter of fact, they were not. Almost all of them rushed past the hurting man. One student even stepped over the man's body as he hurried to teach about the Parable of the Good Samaritan!” (Tom Long, “Meeting the Good Samaritan”).

Knowing and doing the right thing is not the same thing. Just because we know the right thing doesn't mean we can do it. Becoming a Good Samaritan takes more than a nice moral story. We must be transformed on the inside. You see, that's what this parable is about. It's about our hearts being changed. We can't change this world for Christ without a changed heart. We can't be the church God calls us to be without a changed heart.

“Robert Wuthnow, a professor at Princeton University, once conducted some research about why some people are generous and compassionate, while others are not. He found out that for many compassionate people something had happened to them. Someone had acted with compassion toward them, and this experience had transformed their lives. For example, Wuthnow tells the story of Jack Casey, a rescue squad worker, who had little reason to be a Good Samaritan. Casey was raised in a tough home, the child of an alcoholic father. He once said, ‘All my father ever taught me is that I didn't want to grow up to be like him.’

“But something happened to Jack when he was a child that changed his life, changed his heart. He was having surgery one day, and he was frightened. He remembers the surgical nurse standing there and compassionately reassuring him. ‘Don't worry,’ she said to Jack. ‘I'll be here right beside you no matter what happens.’ And when Jack woke up again, she was true to her word and still there.

“Years later, Jack Casey, now a paramedic, was sent to the scene of a highway accident. A man was pinned upside down in his pickup truck, and as Jack was trying to get him out of the wreckage, gasoline was dripping

down on both of them. The rescuers were using power tools to cut the metal, so one spark could have caused everything to go up in flames. The driver was frightened, crying out how scared he was of dying.

“Jack remembered what had happened to him long ago on the operating table, how that nurse had spoken tenderly to him and stayed with him, and he said and did the same thing for the truck driver, ‘Look, don't worry,’ he said, ‘I'm right here with you, I'm not going anywhere.’ When I said that, Jack remembered later, I was reminded of how that nurse had said the same thing and she never left me. Days later, the rescued truck driver said to Jack, ‘You know, you were an idiot, the thing could have exploded and we'd both have been burned up!’ ‘I just couldn't leave you,’ Jack said” (Tom Long, “Meeting the Good Samaritan”).

Jack Casey's heart was changed by someone who helped him. And that experience turned him into a Good Samaritan. Has someone ever had compassion on you? Tom Long suggests that we are the ones in the ditch. We are the wounded and helpless. We are the ones who need to be rescued and saved. And guess what? A Samaritan, a despised and rejected figure, comes to save us. His name is Jesus. Jesus was treated as the other. And he picks us up, tends to our wounds, heals us and puts us back on our feet. And that experience changes us. It changes our hearts. It changes our lives. It changes the way we see and treat the other in our lives.

Long notes that the question of this parable is not simply, “Who is my neighbor?” or “Will I be a neighbor to a stranger?” The question is “Who has been a neighbor to me?” You know the answer. Jesus Christ. If you have experienced his compassion, love and forgiveness you will be able to “Go and do likewise.”

I am grateful for Tom Long and his sermon “Meeting the Good Samaritan.” It was a significant source of inspiration to me as I wrote this sermon:
http://day1.org/1051-meeting_the_good_samaritan