

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Like a Good Neighbor

Luke 10:25-37

Sunday, July 10, 2022

Rev. Dr. Charley Reeb, Senior Pastor

There is nothing like a good story. Something special happens when someone says, "Once upon a time." Stories inspire and entertain. And they often provide a much needed escape from the stress of life. This is why binge watching can be therapeutic. Dozens of streaming services make a killing providing us with stories that we can't stop watching.

I believe another reason why we enjoy stories is because they have predictable and satisfying patterns. Take Hallmark movies for example. Now I would rather get a root canal than sit through one of those things. But scores of people, my wife included, will happily sit through a marathon of Hallmark movies. Why? Because they are satisfyingly predictable.

See if this sounds familiar. A young woman moves from the city to a small town and gets a job at a café. She's feels neglected by her inattentive boyfriend from the city. She meets a local rugged handy man and carpenter and they clash but there's a hint of attraction. They eventually have a date and kiss. Later, they have a big fight. In the last 10 minutes of the movie they get back together and live happily ever after.

And there you have the story line for 99 percent of the movies on the Hallmark Channel! Sorry to spoil it for you.

But, I am just as guilty. I love action movies and most of them have the same predictable pattern, which includes the hero being a hero and saving the day.

Before they released First Blood, they showed it to test audiences. It failed miserably. Why? Because the original script had John Rambo getting killed in the end. Test audiences protested. So, the writers and producers changed the ending with John Rambo surviving – a decision worth millions upon millions of dollars because John Rambo became a franchise.

Disney, Warner Brothers, Universal and other studios have made obscene amounts of money using just a few satisfying, comforting, and predictable story lines and narratives.

We love stories – whether in movies, books, or on TV. We can't get enough of them. Why do you think we preachers love to use them in our sermons? Because they hold your attention and illustrate ideas better than our feeble explanations. Any preacher worth his or her salt knows you need to sprinkle stories throughout your sermons. They prevent boredom and communicate lessons in memorable ways.

By far and away, what people remember most about my sermons, if they remember them at all, are the stories I tell. And that's good because truth often rides on the back of a story.

This is certainly true of Jesus's preaching. We definitely remember the stories he told. Although, they aren't really stories in the way we think of stories. Jesus used parables, which is different than most stories. What's the difference? Well, Jesus' parables are subversive and never predictable.

Parables contain metaphors. A metaphor uses the familiar, something that is common to all of us, to enable you to see something that you had never seen before.

In the case of Jesus, well, he used parables to get you to see something that you probably didn't want to see before! But instead of coming straight at you, a parable sneaks up on you and enters your life with a surprise.

There is no better illustration of this than parable of the Good Samaritan. Most see it as a simple story illustrating the importance of helping someone in need. In fact, in English the word "Samaritan" is used to describe a kind person who will stop and help somebody. This ruins the story because when Jesus first told this parable his listeners thought of Samaritans as anything but good and kind.

You see, 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, in some kind of trouble, stranded on a highway, would we go out of our way to help them?

That's not a bad way to understand the parable, but it's the wrong one. Everything you think you know about this parable is wrong. Jesus told this parable for us to ponder a different question – an even tougher question.

So, let's take a closer look at the parable and uncover this question. 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

In other words, the man was asking, “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 back then. 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.

Then Jesus says 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.”

Then 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

Why was this part of the story so shocking? Because Jews and Samaritans were mortal enemies. There was a great deal of racial and religious hatred between Jews and Samaritans. And 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.

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 man mumbled,

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.

Tom Long tells us that if Jesus was really telling this story to motivate us to go out and help people who are in distress he would have told the story differently. He would have left out all that crazy stuff about the Samaritan. Instead he would have simplified it and said, “A guy needed help. The first two didn’t help, but the third one did. Be like the third person!” But this is not a simple moral story; it’s a parable. And a parable from Jesus always contains something shocking and subversive, something radical.

Tom Long also mentions that a more significant reason why this story isn’t simply about going out and helping strangers is the sobering fact that most of us can’t do it or won’t do it. At least, not in the sacrificial way the Samaritan did it.

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 like that? You see, it takes more than a sermon or lecture or a story to change our hearts and turn us into Good Samaritans. We are helpless and without hope on our own strength. You see, the point of the parable, Long suggests, is 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. 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.

So, the question of this parable is not, “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



11180 Medlock Bridge Road Johns Creek, GA 30097
770-497-8215 www.johnscreekumc.org