

“The Wrong Question”

Perhaps no story is more famous in the New Testament than the account of the Good Samaritan. Even those who don't practice the Christian faith have named hospitals, organizations and laws after this enigmatic person. I am sure many of you saw the story of the 14 year old girl who got stuck, dangling from an amusement park ride in Lake George, NY just last weekend. While her younger brother sat next to her in the gondola screaming for help, one person scaled a tree to pull branches out of the way while others formed a human net and caught her when she dropped.

The broadcast that I was watching called the group that rescued her Good Samaritans, especially the 47 year-old who ended up in the hospital with a back injury after taking most of the brunt of her fall. This implies that you don't actually have to have READ the story to understand the term or its implications, which almost made me NOT want to preach on it.

However, since I am preaching a series on the parables I knew I would eventually have to tackle this well-known passage. The parable is one that exemplifies love of neighbor and in doing so, I believe teaches us a lesson about discipleship. Since making disciples is part of the mission here at Nazareth, let's approach it from that standpoint today.

The story takes place near the end of Jesus' ministry and is another account of his meeting with a Pharisee, or expert in the Law. The lawyer asks a question – what must I do to inherit Eternal life? Jesus appeals to the lawyer's ego by turning the question back

to him. It is his way of saying, "You are a trained professional – tell me what YOU think." The Pharisee answers correctly – you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind and your neighbor as yourself. And Jesus basically says, "Good job buddy – you got it right. Eternal life is yours for the asking! Now, just do it!"

Of course, as Reformed Christians, we know that our eternal life does not depend on anything we DO - the purity of our teachings, the rightness of our interpretations or the quality of our worship. It is solely dependent on the grace of God. Jesus' comment to "just do it" is a reminder of how our gratitude for that grace can manifest itself in our discipleship.

Luke tells us however, that the Pharisee is not even INTERESTED in the right answer but in making Jesus look bad and therefore he will not leave well enough alone. So instead, he changes the question to "But who is my neighbor?" Now, Jesus' answer is not astonishing to us at all but that is because we have been hearing it for centuries.

He begins to tell a story in the familiar fashion of the day by offering a triad, a combination of three principles in a story. In fact, we still tell stories in the same way. Once upon a time there were three bears. Did you hear the one about the Presbyterian, the Methodist and the Baptist who all died and went to heaven together? Three blondes walked into a building. You'd think ONE of them would have seen it! These are how we tell stories even today.

So Jesus tells the story about the man who was beaten and left to die while on the road to Jericho. Thankfully, a priest, a Holy Man, walked by. But he did nothing to help. Those listening with the lawyer would not have been as horrified as we are when we hear this because Jewish laws of the day required that priests keep themselves clean. This

meant he could not touch what he assumed was a corpse. Jesus then says that a Levite also came by and had the same reaction. He crossed over to the other side of the road. Evidently the Levite would also be excused per some rule in the Levite Book of Order.

At this point, however, the listeners were expecting the obvious – one of their own to come in and save the day. Then the triad would have sounded like this – a priest, a Levite and a righteous Jew – or – a priest, a Levite and a healer – or a priest, a Levite and a good Israelite were walking down the road. You get the picture don't you? They were looking for the one that THEY thought of as a neighbor.

It is hard for 21st Century Christians to REALLY understand the confusion that Jesus' answer caused by making a hated Samaritan the hero of the story. If you have studied Biblical history, you may know that there had been bad blood between Jews and Samaritans for hundreds of years, but let me put things in today's perspective.

Jesus' answer would be much like saying, “A Sunni helped a wounded Shiite on the road to the market” or “An Israeli stopped to help a bleeding Palestinian as he traveled through Gaza.” So what we are talking about is RADICAL discipleship – the kind that turns the world upside down! In other words, Jesus decided to make the listeners uncomfortable by forcing them to identify with a victim saved by one of their mortal enemies.

Now those of you who attended Bible study in May will remember that we learned that the purpose of Luke's Gospel is to paint a picture of a Jesus who is the Messiah of the whole world, not just the Jews. Luke wanted everyone to know that God had evaluated their social structures and discovered them unjust and Jesus had been sent to put the people back on track. That's why Luke's Jesus tells this story.

Even the Pharisee knew it as well. His question had legal merit, since one needs to define who his neighbor is within the legal system. But in reality, he asks the wrong question. Because in the context of love, his question was not even relevant. According to Leviticus, the Law that the Pharisee was an expert in, love has to extend beyond the people in one's group. And as I realized this, I wondered what would have happened if Jesus had said, "Sorry sir but you have asked the wrong question!" Because basically that is what happened.

You see, as smart as he was and as accomplished in his study of the law as had become, the Pharisee asks the wrong question. Instead of asking, "Who is my neighbor", it would have made more sense for him to ask Jesus, "**HOW** do I love the Lord with all my heart, soul, strength and mind and my neighbor as myself?" **HOW?** Now, there is a question for all of us to ponder!

The first thing that makes with this question a challenge is that so few of us truly understand how to love ourselves. And I say that knowing how hard it can be for me. I often think of the quote by Ralph Waldo Emerson: "What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us." His words remind me that I am a child of God created in God's image, even when I stray so far from God's will. And God want us to love ourselves so we can be more open and compassionate to others. Only then can we take down the walls that limit who we can be and what we can contribute.

But this still leaves us with the next part of the question – How are we to love people who truly are unlovable? How are we to love people who don't look like us or act like us or smell like us? Who don't do the things that we do the way that we do them.

And what about those who don't even worship the same God that we do? HOW are we to love them?

Well, I believe that the answer lies in Paul's words to the church at Rome. "For while WE were still weak, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly . . . God proves his love for us in that while WE WERE STILL SINNERS Christ died for us."

God did not wait for US to become good and just and faithful and truthful before he died for US. If God had, the events of the cross would have never taken place. No, God loves us AS WE ARE! Because love, true love, is not a feeling but a choice. And God CHOOSES to love us every day, in spite of all that we are or are not. And as God's children we are called to do the same.

What this means is that we have a perpetual indebtedness to love others because God loves us and by God's grace, we have the resources to do it. Because when Jesus Christ died for your salvation and mine, he not only covered us with his love but he put his love in us. And so we are to recognize that the way to live the Christian life is to remember that love is not a feeling for us either but a choice!

But that still leaves the last part of the question – loving God as God loves us. And friends, who among us really knows HOW to love God with all our minds when they are filled with so many other things? How do we even BEGIN to love God with all our strength when we have so little strength left? Many of us are so weary, day by day trying to carry the world on our shoulders. I sent my daughter a card this week that said, "Any idiot can live through a crisis, it's the day to day living that kills us!"

And with all that we have to deal with in our own little worlds, HOW can we even begin to love God in the way that God deserves? That, my friends, is the right question!

Because it is in our loving God that we are truly empowered to love our neighbors and ourselves any where CLOSE to adequately!

But in truth, Jesus did answer the question – right or wrong – simply by telling a parable. Jesus said to the Pharisee and he says to us today, when WE ask the question “How do we do it” with the answer that we ALL need to hear. He says, “Come, sit beside me and let me tell you a story.” And that is the answer to the question. HOW can we learn to love the way Jesus loved, the way God loves? We need to sit beside him and listen. The only way to become a true disciple is to sit in the presence of our God and listen to God's wisdom and goodness.

So as we seek to become disciples and to make them, Jesus says to us all, “Come, sit here, right beside me. As close as you can get. And I will tell you – just listen. Never stop listening. There will be time to go and do, but for now, sit with me awhile. And I will raise you up to do what I have called you to do. To be my disciples. Listen and I will tell you the truth.” In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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