

Pastor Courtney Steitz

2/21/2021

The Good Samaritan

In February of 2011 protests erupted in Tahrir Square in Cairo Egypt as Egyptians protested the injustice of the government and President Mubarak. The protests often turned violent as police fired on protestors and protestors retaliated. Both Christians and Muslims from Egypt joined the protests, and in moments of solidarity, Christians formed a protective ring around their fellow Muslim protesters so that they could pray, and later Muslims did the same to protect Coptic Christians in worship. Two faiths that had often demonized the other in Egypt, acting in support and mutual respect. Sometimes help comes from unexpected places and in unlikely ways that can surprise us. What if the person our culture assumed was the bad guy actually turned out to be the hero?

This surprise may have been exactly what the teacher of the law was feeling when Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan. This teacher of the law was looking for validation from Jesus; the text even tells us that he wanted to justify himself. Loving God and neighbor are big commands, so the teacher of the law tries to find out who exactly his neighbor is. His question was a pretty standard question for the time. Lots of teachers of the law had come up with answers to it, and so when Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan it is pretty surprising.

A man has been hurt on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, attacked by robbers. The road was notoriously dangerous, so that part isn't surprising. Then different people start to talk by, first a priest then a Levite. We of course want them to stop and help the man, but they keep going. As officials and ministers of the Temple, if they become ritually unclean from helping this man, who may be dead, they might be unable to fulfill their responsibilities. They put religious purity and obligation above love of neighbor. Finally, a Samaritan comes by, and the Samaritan stops and helps the man. Takes him to an inn and generously pays for the expense of the man's care. It's the Samaritan that acts like a neighbor to the beaten and wounded man.

This story leaves the teacher of the law mystified. This is a plot twist he didn't expect. The priest or the Levite should have been the hero of the story, not the Samaritan. After all, priests and Levites were the upper echelons of Jewish society. They were well respected, and should have been the most in tune with how God was acting in the world. Instead, the hero of the story is Samaritan. This would have been problematic for the expert of the law in several ways. Samaritans were considered half-breeds. They weren't from the right ethnic background. They had been the ones left behind in the exile that had intermarried with other people in the land. And they worshipped God wrong. They worshipped on a different mountain than the Jews and had different practices. This was not just a case of a little sibling rivalry, everything about Samaritans was considered bad and unclean. Samaritan women were considered unclean from

the moment they were born. The Samaritan is absolutely, 100% the wrong hero for the story. Why would Jesus use the Samaritan as an example of what it means to be a neighbor? The expert in the law is left wondering, how could a Samaritan be my neighbor?

The questions and responses from the lawyer are meant to make out, God is a God of the Jews, and my neighbors are my fellow Jews. In other words, "God is the God of people who think and act like I do, and my neighbor is people like me." When Jesus affirms this reality, all will be well for the expert in the law. Instead, Jesus blows his categories out of the water. God is a God for all people, and God invites you to be a neighbor to the people you despise and think of as unworthy. What is more, is that *those people* might even be a neighbor to you. That is a much bigger and more difficult answer than the young expert in the law had bargained for. Jesus affirms that we should love God and neighbor, and then expanded what exactly that means.

Before we get too hard on the Jewish expert of the law, it can be easy for us to become trapped in the same questions. Who is my neighbor? Who do I have to love and who is so far beyond God's grace I needn't worry about them? We all wrestle with the same questions, who is my neighbor, who do I need to care about, and who can I ignore. Too often, it is easy for me to be the priest or the Levite walking on the other side of the road.

We don't need robbers on the road to Jerusalem to leave people beaten and dying on the side of the road. There are many in need of help in our world already: Victims of Covid-19, those who have lost their jobs or are experiencing hunger because of the pandemic, the people of Myanmar living through another military coup, victims of racial injustice have been left beaten, bruised, and dead on the side of the road too many times.

Jesus does not let the legal expert off the hook, and he doesn't let me off the hook either. I may want a narrower definition of who exactly my neighbor is, but this passage reminds me that I'm called to treat everyone as my neighbor. And what is more, is that this story invites us to consider that those we dislike and mistrust may in fact be neighbors to us. Those whom we mistrust and dislike just might have something to teach us about the expansiveness and depth of God's love for *all* people.

As we journey together through Lent we are following Jesus' path and journey to the cross. And here Jesus tells us a story of several people also on the road to Jerusalem. We may be surprised by who shows up, who is the neighbor, and who we are invited to care for. This is all a part of how we follow Jesus on the road to Jerusalem and on the road to the cross and on the road to resurrection. Jesus' journey invites us into Kingdom Living marked by surprises, new neighbors, and wholeness and life that only Jesus can bring.