

“The Good Samaritan”
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Luke 10:25-37

Any really good story is one in which we find ourselves walking around in the shoes of the characters within it, one in which the plot lines enable us to reflect upon our own lives, our experiences, values and commitments. I am currently reading a series of mysteries set 16th century England during the reign of Henry VIII. The author, C. J. Sansom, earned a PhD in history and is also a lawyer. His books revolve around his protagonist, Matthew Shardlake, a lawyer called upon to solve murders and mysterious disappearances against the backdrop of Tudor England. There is, of course, the predictable intrigue of individuals and families jockeying for positions of power in the royal court. But something of a church geek, my children tell me, obsessed with religious matters, what interests me more is the way Sansom pays attention to the religious turmoil that is a huge part of English history in the 1500's. When the Reformation swept across Europe, its influences beginning to develop our Presbyterian theology and practice, it brought on all kinds of persecution, depending on which religious faction was in power at any given time. Henry VIII wanting a divorce meant going against the Pope in Rome and persecuting Catholics at home. The Lutherans arguing about the substance of communion. Everyone persecuting the Anabaptists who were against infant baptism.

What these mystery novels have had me thinking about is how people back then were willing to die for what they believed. Unlike today's Moslem terrorists whose suicide bombings extinguish the lives of so many others for the sake of faith, or so they claim, the characters in these books put only themselves at risk when they stand up for what they believe is right: what they believe is right about who God is, how God is revealed to us, how God should be worshipped, and how believing in God instructs us to live. I think, for example, of how many 16th century Reformers were executed for simply insisting that the Bible should be translated from Latin into English so that everyone would have access to the word of God, something we take for granted now. Would I have been so brave as to preach that sermon from a pulpit or shout it from a street corner, knowing that the risk was some torturous death? Or would I have been more like the protagonist in these books and kept my fervent beliefs to myself, worried about when the changing religious winds might put me at risk? Remembering this painful and violent season of church history, and imagining the hard choices that paved the way for our religious freedom, I have found myself amazed at the sheer bravery of our forebears' faith, at a time when it was literally a matter of life and death.

When Jesus told parables about what it means to practice the faith, these too were stories about matters of life and death. “What must I do to inherit eternal life” is the question where the Good Samaritan parable begins. Then a story unfolds about lonely roads and dangerous journeys, about evil and attack, pain and suffering, and how some people might be brave to respond and others, despite their faith, might not. The sheer familiarity of this story can cause us to forget its danger, even as it seeks to invite us in – to imagine which character is more akin to who we are.

Not one of Jesus' tales is more familiar than this one. You don't even have to be a Christian to know it, because its title has become part of our culture's working vocabulary. The United States has an entire section of our legal code known as Good Samaritan Laws. By protecting anyone who chooses to help a stranger in need from liability, they encourage

bystanders to offer assistance. Any selfless act on behalf of a stranger is often described in the news as a Good Samaritan deed. A man jumps onto the subway track to shield another who stumbled and fell before an oncoming train; a soldier risking life and limb to pull a fallen Afghan to safety; a passerby who goes beyond all reasonable expectations to secure another's welfare; all wear the moniker of "Good Samaritan." The common usage of the story's title suggests that this is who we are called to be – not the priest or Levite who simply pass by the beaten one in the ditch – but the one who stops, the one who shows mercy, the one who risks his own safety to offer compassion.

Many people believe that is why Jesus told the story – to get us to think about which character we are most likely to be, and to ask ourselves: "Under similar circumstances in a most dangerous place, would I be willing to risk my life to help?" Now, meditating on that question is a pretty good outcome – if the story were simply a moral lesson. But this common, good-works interpretation to imitate the Samaritan may be too simplistic. Like all the stories Jesus tells, the truth of this one runs a bit deeper than that, and the depth is probed by considering the context.

In the previous chapter, not once – but twice, Jesus has told his followers that he is headed toward Jerusalem where he will be betrayed into human hands, undergo great suffering and be killed. So on his way, he stops in a village and a local lawyer tries to expose a weakness in his teaching. "Just what do I need to do to inherit eternal life?" "You're the lawyer," Jesus says, meaning he knew the scriptures; "What does the law of Moses say?" "Love God with all your heart and soul and strength and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself." (Every good and faithful Jew knew that by heart.) "Well, there you have it," Jesus responds, "Do this and you will have life." But the lawyer wasn't going to let the debate end there, "Let's parse the definition of what you mean exactly...who is my neighbor?" Then Jesus begins his famous story.

The road from Jericho was notoriously dangerous, steep, winding, riddled with thieves and never safe to travel alone. A man in desperate need appears beaten and robbed – no surprise here; this would be a predictable scene. But then two utterly shocking things happen. First, two devoutly religious people, in charge of worship life in the Temple, who we would expect to stop, cross the road to avoid the man altogether. Then secondly, the Samaritan arrives on the scene, from a race and religion long despised and rejected, from whom nothing would be expected, but who is moved by compassion to care tenderly for the injured man. The question is put back to the lawyer. Who do you think proved neighbor to the man?

Do you see what Jesus does? It is subtle and easy to miss. The lawyer is trying to identify which character he would be, assuming he would easily fall into the role of the helper. He stands there powerful and wealthy, strong and sure, wondering to whom he should dole out measured amounts of his righteousness and riches. But something changes between his question, "Who is my neighbor?" i.e. whom am I obligated to help? and the answer, "the one who showed mercy." The lawyer, out of religious and cultural hatred cannot even mutter the name, "Samaritan," even though he's the one who proved to be neighbor. He says simply: "The one who showed mercy." The lawyer would never assume the character of a Samaritan, which then forces him to imagine himself – not as the do-gooder doling out a bit of cash, but as the man in the ditch needing rescue.

"What must I do to inherit eternal life," he asked at the beginning? And by way of the story, and insight of Jesus the story teller, the answer is clear – absolutely nothing. Just recognize the despised and rejected One, who has come down the road to help you, the one who is headed for Jerusalem to suffer and die, Jesus who climbs in the ditch with you and fully identifies with

your pain and humanity in the face of death. He, and he alone, is the answer to both of your questions about eternal life, and about your neighbor.

You see, we don't have the capacity to be just like the Samaritan, completely rejected and despised, any more than I think I could be as brave as those 16th century preachers, who risked being burned at the stake to forward the Reformation. We can try – indeed it is important to try – to assume the role of every character in this story. To recognize that -- while we take pride in our faith we often walk by – we cross the street to avoid the person in need, we are afraid of the risk and we simply pass by. The priest and the Levite convict us of our neglect to help our neighbors in need, an important role for us to imagine as we seek to be more faithful to Christ. We can even identify with the Samaritan: to consider our calling to respond to the needs of the least and the lost, the hungry, the poor, the imprisoned – all those whom Christ asks us to serve in his name. Together as the body of Christ, the church, the role the Samaritan plays in this parable commissions us to identify with the world's suffering, to stop and help and heal, to go that extra mile to care for the welfare of our neighbors in need.

And because of its context, with Jesus' recent announcement that he is on the way to Jerusalem, to suffer and die, the parable also reminds us that we are – like the lawyer who ends up in the role of the one in the ditch, who is saved by the rejected One, Jesus Christ – the one who shows mercy, who enables and calls us “to go, and do likewise.” AMEN.