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“What Is So Good About the Good Samaritan?”

A sermon by Joseph S. Harvard

15th Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 11, 2010

Amos 7:7–17; Ps. 82; Col. 1:1–14; Lk. 10:25–37

Over the past thirty years that we’ve been in ministry together here in Durham, I have observed my friend, Rabbi John Friedman of Judea Reform Congregation. One of the things I’ve noticed about John is that when anyone, myself included, asked him a question, especially a theological question, John usually does not respond with a direct answer, but he responds with a story. That is the Jewish way of teaching and the way in which Jesus was trained and the way that led him to teach in parables. People would come up to Jesus with questions or concerns. Instead of confronting their questions directly, hitting their issues head-on, Jesus would defuse their anxiety with a story—stories taken from life experiences. The listeners would be drawn into the story. The stories were not answers; rather, they were challenges to look at things from a different perspective, a different angle. Jesus took everyday experiences, familiar circumstances and invited his listeners to look at them from the perspective of God’s reign.

A case in point, the Gospel lesson for this morning from Luke 10:25–37:

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. ‘Teacher,’ he said, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ He said to him, ‘What is written in the law? What do you read there?’ He answered, ‘You shall 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 your neighbor as yourself.’

And he said to him, 'You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.'

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?' Jesus replied, 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend." Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'

Let us pray.

Gracious God, we are a people with many words and much talk. We recite creeds, we listen to ads and propaganda and slogans and sound bites. We keep listening among these words for comfort and direction. We find ourselves anxious and confused by the cacophony. And then the den is broken. You speak and we enter the zone of address. You name and we are summoned, commanded, sent. We hear and cringe and pause, overwhelmed by your mandate. We listen and you speak again and again. You are the words of presence, promise of protection, assurance of solidarity. We breathe easier, still afraid, but on our way at risk and not alone. Give us good ears in these days that we may hear your mandate and listen to your assurance through Christ our Lord. Amen.

In John Steinbeck's classic, *East of Eden*, Liza Hamilton serves as the matriarch of her family. She is an advocate of biblical morality and reads the scriptures daily as the guide for her life. Yet there are some cracks in her pious veneer. Steinbeck describes her use of the Bible sublimely:

Her total intellectual association was the Bible... In that one book she had her history and her poetry, her knowledge of peoples and things, her ethics, her morals, and her salvation. She never studied the Bible or inspected it; she just read it... And finally she came to a point where she knew it so well that she went right on reading it without listening.¹

The final line haunts me: “She went right on reading it without listening.” When we hear today’s Scripture lesson, the story of the Good Samaritan, it is easy to move on quickly and to say, “Oh, yeah, we know what that one’s about; that’s about a man who helps another man, and that’s what we’re supposed to do.” Biblical texts that are familiar to us are often the very ones whose messages have often been muted rather than released. There is much more to this story than just a man helping another man; there’s more than a cutting critique of religious leaders who are callous. There’s more to it than a model of neighborliness. In this text, Jesus explores expectations for God’s people. What does God expect of us? He tears down notions of status and invites us, the hearers, to become part of God’s mission in the world today.

A lawyer comes up to Jesus as he was on his way to Jerusalem. The lawyer asks, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” That is a good question. It is the same question in another form that you might ask: “What is the meaning of my life? Why am I here? What is the purpose of my existence?”

Jesus seems to side-step the question. He doesn’t give a direct answer. He asked the lawyer what the law says, since the lawyer was an expert in the Torah. The lawyer tells him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with

¹ John Steinbeck, *East of Eden*, New York: Penguin Books, 2002, p. 42.

all your soul, and with all your might (Deut. 6:5), and you shall love your neighbor as yourself (Lev. 19:18).” “Good answer,” Jesus said. “Now go and do it.”

Case closed. Well, not so fast. Seeking to justify himself, the text says, the lawyer asks one more question: “Who is my neighbor?”

That was a tough question. People in the region where Jesus and the lawyer lived did not have many neighbors. They were often at war with each other. There were also rumors of war. It was a tough question then as it is for us today: *Who are our neighbors?* Are they the people who live down the street from us? Are they the people who live on the other side of town? How about this global village we live in? *Who are our neighbors?*

Jesus answers this question with a story, a parable. A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho on what is now called the Jericho Road. He was robbed, beaten, and left for dead beside the road. Two travelers went by, a priest and a Levite, a temple official, and they passed by on the other side.

Now this is where it is easy to be tough on the religious folks – the preachers and the elders and the leaders of the church. Please don’t beat up on us today. Let’s not be too hard on these religious folks because the road from Jerusalem to Jericho was a dangerous road. There was a drop of several hundred feet. It was winding and curving, there were places for people to hide to rob you. Your goal was to make it down the Jericho Road without any harm coming to you. Keep your eye on the road. Best thing to do is keep looking ahead, and keep on trucking.

Who knows? The man lying on the side could have been a decoy. It has happened. He could have been faking it. There could be some other people lying in wait. And in the worst-case scenario, he could already be dead. There were Jewish laws that said if a priest or Levite touched the corpse, they would be considered unclean and unable to function in the temple any longer. There were good reasons they kept on going.

A third traveler came down the road – a Samaritan. When you hear the word “Samaritan,” what comes to your mind? We think about the Good Samaritan, don’t we? If you had said the words “Good Samaritan” to the first people who heard this story, they would have started laughing. “A Good Samaritan? There is no such thing!” That’s like saying a good terrorist or a good racist. This story has been so much a part of our lives that we don’t know how to understand the word ‘Samaritan’. But that’s not what the lawyer would have thought. He would not have thought ‘good’ when he first heard Jesus tell that story.

Jews and Samaritans had nothing to do with each other. Remember when Jesus encounters the woman at the well in John’s Gospel, and he asked her for some water, and she said, “What would you, a Jew, have to do with me, a Samaritan? We don’t have anything to do with each other.”

Later on, Jesus goes through some villages, and he comes to a Samaritan village. They won’t listen to him. The implication is they’re not responsive, and so he tells his disciples to move on. As far as Jews were concerned, Samaritans were not their neighbors—they were their enemies. You locked your doors when Samaritans came by. Along came a Samaritan. Well, he’ll probably finish the guy off.

It is like telling the story and saying an Israeli was lying in the ditch and a Palestinian came by and helped him. Or just pick two people who are historically at odds with each other. That’s the surprise in the story, that we called the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

It must have surprised the lawyer. He thought the Samaritan would have spit on the man in anger—one less Jew to worry about. But he didn’t. He didn’t keep his distance. He had compassion for him.

So why do you think the Samaritan had compassion for the man in the ditch? Why did he go the extra mile, to take time to take him back to the inn, to leave money to help him? Why was he moved with compassion? It might have been because of some pain in his life. Maybe he knew what it was to be shunned, to be left on the side of the road. Henri Nouwen, the Roman Catholic priest, talks about the possibility of us becoming “wounded healers”—people who have been wounded

using our wounds as a way to be sensitive to the needs and hurts and pains of others. What this Samaritan does is extraordinary. We live in a world that tells us it's the law of the survival of the fittest. You look after yourself. You do not lay anything out there at risk to help another person.

Few of us have been treated like Samaritans. Few of us have been called social outcasts, theological heretics. But I believe if we could tell our stories this morning, all of us have had things happen to us that we did not understand: "Why was I treated that way?" We have all suffered loss, failure, disappointment. Our temptation is to respond in anger, in resignation, or just giving up. But the story suggests that our wounds can be a source of healing for others.

My friends, this business of compassion is mysterious. It's not something we come by naturally, but it's God's gift to us. It sneaks up on us. It overcomes us.

In the last sermon he preached before he was assassinated, Martin Luther King, Jr. talked about the Good Samaritan. That was the parable he used for his sermon on that night in Memphis. He said we needed to develop a kind of "dangerous unselfishness." He said when you walk down the Jericho Road, the first question that you might ask is, "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?" But he said when the Good Samaritan came by, he reversed the question: "If I do not help this man, what will happen to him?"

That's the question of compassion. That's the question before you and me. That's "the plumb line," as Amos called it, the measuring stick by which God measures us as we try to live out our faith. Do we respond simply thinking about our own security and safety or do we think about the well-being of the other? Do we see the other as a fellow human being?

King was trying to explain why he had come to Memphis to help a group of garbage workers. People had told him it was dangerous. "You can be killed," they said, and he was. But he said, "If I don't stop to help the garbage workers, what will happen to them, and ultimately, what will happen to me?"

The real surprise in this story is, who do you identify with? Do you identify with the Good Samaritan? Most of us hope we'd be like him.

One day, I was reading a section of *Church Dogmatics* by Karl Barth, one of my teachers. Barth had the audacity to suggest that the proper reading of this story is to see ourselves not as the Good Samaritan but as the one in the ditch... that *I* was the one who needed help... that *I* was the one dependent on the mercy and compassion of the outsider.

Isn't this what the Good News of the Gospel is about? When we are lost, God finds us. When we are down, God stands besides us and helps to pick us up. When we are in the ditch—and all of us have been there in one way or another—God pulls us out. And look who reaches out with a hand: a Jewish carpenter's son from a little village called Nazareth, who was crucified on a cross between two thieves. “By his wounds, we are healed.”

That's what draws us to this table. When we were lying in the ditch, he reached down and touched us. And by our wounds healed, we are able to become wounded healers. Don't just read this story. Listen to this story. You'll find that things happen at the deepest levels of our lives. This story has the power to open up deep places so that the love of God can heal us and empower us to “go and do likewise.”

The lawyer was seeking an answer to the question of what matters in life. What matters in life? An answer is found in the words of that old Gospel song, “If I Can Help Somebody”:

If I can help somebody, as I pass along,
If I can cheer somebody, with a word or song,
If I can show somebody, how they're traveling wrong,
Then my living shall not be in vain.
Then my living shall not be in vain.²

Amen.

² Alma Bazel Androzzo, *If I Can Help Somebody*, 1945.