

The Stranger as the Neighbor
July 10, 2022
Luke 10:25-37
Rev. Laurie Crelly at East Church
Grand Rapids MI

As we continue with our series on The Outsiders we find the hero in today's story to be the outsider. Having grown up with this story and even finding it a familiar story in our culture we know and often want to be seen as the Good Samaritan, the hero. We even have laws now in society protecting people who jump into action as good Samaritans in part to encourage people to act fearlessly on their impulses to save lives. We have even gone so far as to protect others from prosecution if the life they are saving is a direct result of a drug or alcohol overdose. Most likely the rescuer was also doing drugs with the victim. There are even billboards that say "If you witness an alcohol or drug overdose don't run, call 911: Good Samaritan Overdose Law protects you from arrest." So we have this widespread understanding of the concept of the Good Samaritan. We see them as the people that take action to save others from danger and death.

But did you know that the Samaritan was usually not the hero of the story but often used as the bad person or villain in Jesus' culture? Judean Jewish people saw Samaritans as half-breed traitors to the true faith. This is a cultural perspective that stems back to at least the Babylonian Exile. Samaria, the northern kingdom of Israel did not get exiled like the Southern tribes of Judea. The people who stayed behind eventually intermarried with the local non-Jewish people but retained their Jewish religious heritage. Over the years the two groups, those who stayed and those who returned from Babylon, eventually established their own territories and faith practices but both considered themselves followers of Moses and the One true God. If you recall the story of the woman at the well, you will hear some of the religious differences between Judean and Samaritan worship of the Jewish faith. So for the audience

hearing or reading this story around the time of Jesus it would have been an odd twist to the story that the Samaritan was the hero.

The story begins with a Lawyer of Jewish law asking how to gain eternal life and Jesus gets him to answer his own question – “love God with all your being and love your neighbor as you love yourself.” But somewhere along the way this person feels that there should be an exception to that rule. “Truly God did not mean everyone?” Seems to be the vibe he is casting with that question. So, Jesus gives us this story. Like good storytelling fashion, you have villains, a victim and a hero. There are two types of villains in this story. First you have the robbers for obvious reasons. They are mistreating a neighbor, stealing from him and leaving them for dead. The second villain, who some would argue are bystanders, are both religious people who come by and seeing, maybe even hearing the victim moaning, go around them to avoid or ignore the scene. As good pious people, leaders in the faith, you would think they would be compelled to do something by their own code of ethics, but no, they do nothing. It begs the question are they as guilty as the robbers if they do nothing and this man dies? Is their inaction wrong? We certainly don't want to be them do we? Is this how a good neighbor acts?

Then along comes a third person. If the listener is jumping ahead of the story, they may have expected a common, fellow Jewish person to be the hero, maybe someone like themselves. But instead, Jesus says it is a Samaritan man. A person the community looks down on or is even mean to. The key to the story is how we define neighbor. For many of the listeners of Jesus' time, a Samaritan was not seen as a neighbor, but as an outsider, someone to avoid or despise. A simple definition of neighbor was someone who settles down near you, but the Judean people had segregated the Samaritans to their own territory. They were no longer considered neighbors. Even though they shared the same heritage and faith, they were seen as less than and treated as such. So for Jesus to make the Samaritan as the hero was a challenge to the idea that Samaritans were bad people to avoid.

Jesus shifted the concept of neighbor from a physical proximity to a deeper sense of identity. A neighbor was anyone who identifies with the wounded? We find ourselves in this outsider, this Samaritan, because it is how we would want to be treated by others. We don't want someone abusing or mistreating us. We don't want someone ignoring or avoiding us when we are hurting. We don't want someone judging us and deciding that we are somehow to blame for our troubles and leaves us in our state. We look for compassion, we look for help, we long to be seen as human and worthy of dignity and love. Those are the kinds of people we want as neighbors. People who watch out for one another and are there in times of need. Jesus challenges the listener to be that kind of neighbor to those who are seen as outsiders and neglected.

The Lawyer seemed to want to find a justification for his mistreatment of others that he deemed unworthy of love. He didn't really want to live up to the standard of Love that the law was calling him to. Instead he wanted to be justified in his own bigotry and selfishness. Jesus challenges him to a different standard a standard of love. When asked "who was the neighbor in the story, the lawyer and others had to admit it was the one who showed mercy. The term mercy here is defined as a special and immediate regard to the misery which is the consequence of sins. Mercy or *Elios* in Greek is extended for the alleviation of the consequences of sin. Even if we think that the state that someone is in is because of their own sin, it does not allow us to abandon them in that state of wrongdoing. The hero in such situations is considered the Good Samaritan who steps in and alleviates the pain and suffering. To restore them to the community even.

Thomas Merton, a famous Catholic monk and writer wrote this regarding love:

"Our job is to love others without stopping to inquire whether or not they are worthy. That is not our business and, in fact, it is nobody's business. What we are asked to do is to love, and this love itself will render both ourselves and our neighbors worthy."

The challenge today is to once again look and see who are the victims, who are the villains and who are the heroes. This story reminds us that our titles mean nothing if they do not match the actions of the heart. The Samaritan was deemed an outsider and a heretic by the religious authorities of Jesus day. And yet in the story it is the religious person who is acting ungodly, inhumane and cruel having no compassion for their fellow traveler who is dying. It is the Outsider that we are challenged to look up to and to emulate. We should all want to be the hero, the outsider caring and loving others.