



Sunday, May 17, 2020  
*Easter Sermon Series: We're All in This Together*

Being a Good Samaritan In a Day of COVID-19  
Pastor Vern Christopherson

**Luke 10:25-37 NRSV**

<sup>25</sup>Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" <sup>26</sup>He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" <sup>27</sup>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." <sup>28</sup>And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

<sup>29</sup>But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" <sup>30</sup>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. <sup>31</sup>Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. <sup>32</sup>So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. <sup>33</sup>But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. <sup>34</sup>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. <sup>35</sup>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.' <sup>36</sup>Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" <sup>37</sup>He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

It was Sunday morning, March 22. I remember the day well because it was our first Sunday without in-person worship. The front doors were unlocked because a few worship leaders needed to get in. I came out of the office and there was a man standing outside the women's bathroom. He looked rough-around-the-edges. "What's your name?" I barked. "Storm," he mumbled. "What are you doing here?" I pressed, "We're closed. Didn't you see the sign on the door?" I was very aware that we were working to close up the building and keep it as safe as possible. He replied, "My girlfriend needed to use the

women's bathroom. We came from Sinclair across the street. We're soon getting a bus to Owatonna." I didn't press further, but I'll admit: I was on edge about these strangers, especially since we were hearing more and more about the dangers of COVID-19.

Just then the woman appeared. She looked like she wasn't feeling well. She straightened her clothes and said her name was Ashley. And she politely thanked me for the use of our restroom. The couple turned to leave. I kept an eye on them as they headed down the hallway and out the front door. After a couple of minutes, I locked that door. And I thought that would be the end of it.

Worship began 20 minutes later. I looked in the bulletin. Pastor Shelley was preaching on a passage from Mark. Her sermon was entitled, "Is Love Actually All We Need?" In the passage, Jesus was asked which commandment was the greatest? He said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. And a second is like it: love your neighbor as yourself."

After my run-in in the hallway, I remember thinking: Isn't that just like Jesus, always stepping on our toes when we least expect it? If I'd been thinking of this passage when confronting Storm and Ashley, I might have reacted much the same - gotta keep the building safe - but perhaps I would have been kinder to them. I couldn't help but think: this coronavirus is going to make loving our neighbor even harder.

If there's a story we know well from the Bible, it's the parable of the Good Samaritan. And not only is it well-known, it's convicting, not unlike the passage on which Pastor Shelley was preaching. We often view the parable as a morality tale: do unto others as you would have them do unto you; love your neighbor as yourself.

It's easy to imagine the story with contemporary details. A man is driving on the road from Plainview to Rochester. His car gets stopped at a construction detour. Turns out there are a couple of car-jackers waiting in the weeds and they've got guns. They order the man out of his car, beat him up pretty badly, and steal the car. He's knocked unconscious. He's left half-dead along the side of the road.

A pastor comes by. He notices a clump of something by the side of the road. It's mostly a distraction to him. He moves to the other side. He really doesn't have time to stop. He's got a sermon to write. And so he drives on by. A church council member is on that same road. She also notices the clump, and for safety sake, moves to the other side. She's got a council meeting to attend. They're talking about possibly re-opening their church. So she drives

on by too. Finally, a humble, sincere, ordinary Christian like you drives by. You've got things to do, and the situation looks messy, but hey, as you get closer, you can see it's a person. And you can't leave him in the ditch. He's been bleeding a lot. You get him in the backseat, head for the ER at St. Mary's Hospital, and pray like crazy he'll still be alive when you get there.

So, here's my question for you: who do you identify with in this story? Probably not the distracted pastor or the cautious council member. Nobody wants to be like them. No, you're the humble, sincere, ordinary Christian, right? Sure, you may have called for an ambulance and not put the guy in your backseat, but what if you thought he might not make it?

When Jesus tells a parable like this, it's because he wants us to be good neighbors. He wants us to reach out with compassion, to do what we can to help those in need. And he suggests that that's what neighbors do: they see a need and try to respond.

Let's be honest: it's not easy to be a good Samaritan. Oh, we have good intentions. But life gets in the way. Schedules are full. Money is tight. We're often not sure what we'd be getting into. Now, with COVID-19, it's even more complicated. Should we even go *near* someone? What if they have the virus? Or, what if we have the virus, and don't know it, and would unintentionally pass it on to them?

We want to be good Samaritans. It feels like the right thing to do, even in a world of COVID-19. Our calling as Christians is to finish this story...in our time and place. That requires creativity. I've been hearing lots of stories: friends taking sick people to the doctor. People sewing masks. Phone calls and cards to let people know you're thinking of them.

This past week a Zumbro couple donated \$1000 to our Good Samaritan Fund. They wanted us to buy groceries for those who might be going hungry, especially the children.

Some efforts go even further. I heard of a website known as *1 Day Sooner*. There's a list of people - mostly young adults - who have volunteered to become infected with COVID-19 in an effort to develop a vaccine. Over 16,000 are on the list. The efforts may be controversial - infecting someone with a deadly disease - but the hearts of these people seem to be in the right place. Coronavirus may be insidious. Still, it's giving us plenty of opportunities to be the neighbors Jesus calls us to be.

I'm greatly moved by these efforts. The parable of the Good Samaritan inspires us to care in big and little ways. Even as I say this, however, a part of me hopes our understanding of this story can go beyond a simple morality

tale. Jesus is stepping on our toes again, and when we least expect it. Notice that halfway through the story, the focus shifts to the one who's offering help – the Samaritan. Suddenly no self-respecting Jew wants to be the hero. Jesus seems to be pushing his listeners off the white horse and toward the ditch, to the one who's bruised, beaten, and waiting for help to come.

This might be a stretch. If you can, imagine yourself in the ditch. I know it's hard, we don't want to be a burden to anyone. But try to picture it. As you do, remember that the priest and the Levite are normal enough *Jewish* folks. You probably would have been more-than-grateful to receive their care. But this *Samaritan* guy – do you really want help from him? Just a reminder: the Samaritans were half-breeds. They were aliens. They had a different temple to worship God and a different way of following the law. On top of that, they claimed to be the true children of Abraham. Jews hated Samaritans.

So, why would Jesus tell a nice story like this with a Samaritan as the hero? Maybe to turn the tables. Maybe for much the same reason as we're learning about ourselves with COVID-19. Suddenly many of us strong, capable people have found ourselves more on the receiving end of things than the giving end of things. Instead of us buying groceries for others, people are buying groceries for us. People are wearing masks around us, and not only for their sake, but for ours. People are calling up to see how we're doing, rather than us calling them first. And they're telling us they're praying for us.

Slowly but surely these efforts can change a person's point of view. We begin to see that all of us can get to a place where we need some help. If you're that guy in the ditch, feeling less able to help yourself, I suspect you might feel differently about the one who's coming to you. Suddenly you're not so worried about who it is. Granted, it won't be a Samaritan, but it might be someone you're been concerned about in the past – fill in the blanks. How about Storm and Ashley? How about a Republican or a Democrat, or more specifically, how about Mitch McConnell or Nancy Pelosi? How about a redneck from a biker bar in Wisconsin or a gay man from a Minneapolis nightclub or an evangelical Christian who worries just as much about getting you saved as getting you to the hospital?

Truth be told, Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan is meant to stretch us. It might have even more to say to us if we spend more time in the ditch; if we spend more time considering our common humanity. We are all made in the image of God, even those who don't look anything like you and me. We're all in this together...and not just at Zumbro, but as Americans, and as citizens of the world. In so many words Jesus is telling us: *Can we please act more like this?*

Journalist Peter Arnett tells of a time he was in Israel, in a small village on the West Bank. A bomb exploded. Bodies flew through the air and there was blood everywhere. A man came running up to Peter holding a little girl in his arms. He pleaded with Peter to take her to a hospital. He said, "As a member of the press, you'd be able to get through the security checkpoints." Peter and the man cradling the girl in his arms, jumped in his car and rushed to the hospital. The whole time the man was pleading for him to go faster. He was heartbroken at the thought that the little girl might die.

Sadly, the little girl's injuries were too great. She died on the operating table. When the doctor came out to give them the news, the man collapsed in tears. Peter Arnett was at a loss for words. "I don't know what to say," he told the man. "I can't imagine what you must be going through. I've never lost a child."

It was then that the man said, "Oh, mister! That girl was not my daughter. I'm an Israeli settler. She was a Palestinian. But there comes a time when each of us must realize that every child, regardless of that child's background, is a daughter or a son. There must come a time when we realize that we are all family."

Jesus chooses an outcast to take center stage in his parable about the human family, and what it means to be a neighbor. When you think about it, the Samaritan who shows mercy is really playing the role of Jesus himself. It's a way of saying that God often shows up where we least expect God to be. No one expected God to reveal God's glory through the disgrace of the cross. And no one expected God to reveal God's power through vulnerability and suffering. But that's what happened.

The Good Samaritan story is more than a morality tale. It's also a promise. The promise is this: God comes where we least expect God to be, because God comes for all: Jews and Samaritans; Storm and Ashley; distracted pastors and cautious council members; Israelis and Palestinians; humble, sincere, ordinary Christians and those who are not. No one is beyond the pale of God's mercy. No one is beyond the reach of God's love. No one.

Because of this, God chooses people no one expects and does amazing things through them; and yes, sometimes thorough people like you and me. But here's the truth: we might need to spend a little time in the ditch to see it. Amen.