

# Cultural Enemies

## - What They Teach Us

### The Parable of the Good Samaritan

Luke 10:25-37  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Why's the pastor preaching on this tired old parable again? Yeah, we know the moral of the story of the Good Samaritan: everyone's my neighbor and I'm supposed to be nice and helpful to those in need. We've heard it all before a thousand times.

That was the conversation I had with myself earlier this week when I saw that this was the assigned lectionary Gospel Reading for this Sunday. What else, I wondered, can be said about this over-familiar story that we don't already know? Most of us, for instance, remember that the shocking element in Jesus' parable is that the Samaritan, a racial and social class of people despised by the Jews – their cultural enemies, turned out not to be the expected bad guy in this story, but rather the one whose merciful actions we are called to mimic. Most of us also remember that this parable doesn't really answer the question, "Who is my neighbor?" but rather addresses the issue of "What is a neighbor?" And the answer to that question is a neighbor is someone who shows mercy and compassion to others, including to those whom are considered a cultural enemy.

We often walk away from this parable, therefore, wondering if we would have the courage to be neighborly – even to those who might despise us. This approach to interpreting this parable can be summed up with a quote by the great German theologian, **Dietrich Bonhoeffer**,

Neighborliness is not a quality in *other* people, it is simply their claim on *ourselves*. We have literally no time to sit down and ask ourselves whether so-and-so is our neighbor or not. We must get into action and obey; we must behave like a neighbor to that person.

This narrative from Luke 10 concludes with Jesus commanding the lawyer, who recognized for himself who was actually acting like a good neighbor in this story, to "Go and do likewise". So that's our usual take-away from this biblical story, that in order to be a good neighbor to others, we need to show them mercy and compassion by doing what we can to help the wounded in our society.

There's nothing wrong with incorporating that understanding into how we live our lives as followers of the ways and teachings of Jesus. But is that really all we can glean from this parable? Well, not according to author and blogger David Henson. He posted a remarkable article in 2013 to patheos.com, a website that offers a progressive perspective on a variety of faith traditions. Henson entitled his blog, "**Jesus Doesn't Want You to be a Good Samaritan.**" **Excuse me.** Needless to say that caught my attention. Upon further

reading I realized that his fresh and challenging approach to this parable bears repeating, even shouted from the rooftops.

Henson begins, "Jesus doesn't really want you to be the good Samaritan. At least, that's not the point of his story in this week's Gospel." Okay. **What then is the point Jesus was trying to make?** He continues:

Unfortunately, when Christians hear this story, we think Jesus is asking us to be the unlikely do-gooders in the world who bind wounds of strangers, pay medical bills of distant neighbors, and offer unexpected compassion to the beaten and wounded traveler.

In short, we have understood this parable as a call to boundary-crossing charity, and we are to be the charitable ones.

As a result, we have transformed this subversive story into little more than a mushy morality tale about random acts of kindness to strangers that, at its worst, buttresses the damaging and pervasive charity-industrial complex in American churches. We have whitewashed this radical parable into a fantasy of the privileged and wealthy in which we believe Christ calls us only to apply bandages, throw money at the pain and injustice in the world, and trust it is enough.

In this light, this parable not only justifies but also glorifies drive-by charity as the pinnacle of Christ's command to love thy neighbor. Because in this story, we think Jesus is encouraging us to be like the Samaritan. But he is not.

I think Henson has his hand on the pulse of how many of us in America in the 21<sup>st</sup> century need to approach Jesus' originally subversive teachings, particularly those of us who find ourselves basically on the privileged and often benevolent side of the equation. So, what can we find in this parable that challenges us? Henson continues:

Jesus, in this parable, isn't asking us to go and do likewise so that we can be charitable like the Samaritan. His point is much more subtle. Of course, we are to bind the wounds of the wounded. Of course, we are to take care of the oppressed and the downtrodden. We all know this to be what God asks of us. **Works of charity and mercy are a given in the life of faith.**

Even the lawyer in the story knows this without a second thought. So, no, I don't think the point of this parable is for us to be do-gooders.

Instead, when Jesus tells the lawyer to go and do likewise, he is asking the lawyer to go and imitate the Samaritan, his cultural enemy. He is asking the educated lawyer to sit at the feet of the Other in order to learn the way of salvation. He is asking this myopic man to see the people he despises most are the very people who hold for him the key to eternal life.

**"Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" the lawyer asks. "See your enemy as your teacher,"** Jesus replies through this parable.

Jesus doesn't want us to be the Good Samaritans. Rather, **Jesus wants us to know who the Samaritans are in our own lives. Then, he asks us to do the hard work of seeing them as humans not as Others, as teachers not as our students, as the**

### **heroes who offer us salvation rather than the victims who need our saving help...**

The lawyer had begun by addressing Jesus as the teacher. Jesus redirected the lawyer to his enemy as his true teacher, that is, if the man honestly wanted to learn what it meant to live an eternal life. But the lawyer could not even bring himself to acknowledge the one who showed mercy was indeed a Samaritan.

Now, we all have our own cultural enemies, and we all have our derogatory names for them. They are slurs based on race, on sexuality, on class, on [gender, on religious or] political preference (and progressives, let's not forget our favorites like "redneck" and "right-wing nut job"). **The parable of the Samaritan asks us to confess first that we have these cultural enemies** — be it an undocumented immigrant, a gay person, a poor person, a rural gun rights-advocate, or a staunch Republican [a homeless person, a fundamentalist, a homophobe, a staunch pro-life advocate, a misogynist, a person who wears a MAGA hat. How would you fill out the list of your cultural enemies?]. Then, the parable asks us to see that our salvation lies in loving these enemies enough to be willing to learn something from them.

**The problem is we don't want to learn from our enemies. We don't want them to be our teachers.** Because, if we are willing to learn from them, if we are willing to take the time to listen to their stories, then it will become difficult to demonize them, to blame them for all that ails our country and our own lives, to rage at them from afar...

But then, what in the world will we do with our own and our world's woundedness when we have no one to blame for them?

Perhaps at that moment, we will find ourselves in this story.

As the world's wealthy and powerful, we also assume we are the world's teachers and saviors. We believe this parable wants us to condescend to the broken and poor in order to save them. **We believe we are the Samaritans and that their salvation lies with us. It is a troubling assumption of the privileged.**

Of course, it is equally dangerous to assume that our cultural enemies are our saviors only and that we rely on them to be our teachers. It takes the caricature and simply reverses it. It is a troubling assumption of the well-meaning privileged.

We are each the beaten one on the roadside, in need of salvation from our [cultural] enemies. We are each the Samaritan, with the power to save our enemies by loving them. In other words, this parable asks us to do the unthinkable.

It asks us to heal and to be healed by our [cultural] enemies, our neighbors, our sisters and brothers.

**So, the issue is not "who is my neighbor?" but can we recognize that the enemy might be our neighbor, even our benefactor, and can we accept this disruption of our stereotypes?**

Jesus' parables were never meant to be easy.

Amen.

Resource: David R. Henson: <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/davidhenson/2013/07/jesus-doesnt-want-you-to-be-a-good-samaritan-lectionary-reflection-for-proper-10c>