

What Our Cultural “Enemies” Can Teach Us

The Parable of the Good Samaritan

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

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Yeah, I know, almost everyone is basically familiar with the point of Jesus' parable of The Good Samaritan: everyone's my neighbor and I'm supposed to be compassionate and helpful to those in need. Though no less valid, we've heard it all a thousand times before. What else, you might wonder then, can be said about this overly familiar story that we don't already know?

Most of us, for instance, remember that in Jesus' parable the Samaritan was from a racial and social class of people despised by the Jews – their cultural enemies. The shock, then, was the Samaritan 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 proposed 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 who consider them as 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 20th century 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**.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave a speech in Memphis on April 3, 1968, known as “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop.” It was the night before he was killed. In that speech he discussed the Good Samaritan passage. He thought that the Levite and Priest, who didn't stop to help the man in the ditch, were afraid of what might happen to them if they helped the man. What if he was not really hurt? What if it was a set up? What if it would make them “unclean” if he was dead? Dr. King then changes the focus. He said **what if the correct question isn't “what might happen to me if I help?” But “If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?”** Dr. King thought that the lack of compassion not only leaves the suffering without help, but it also corrodes our souls if we ignore the suffering.

Likewise, our usual take-away from this biblical story is 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? **Is there a valid alternative interpretation?** There is according to author and blogger **David Henson**. He posted a remarkable article in 2013 on 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.**" Needless to say, that caught my attention, and I'm sure it does yours.

Upon further reading I realized that his fresh and challenging approach to this parable bears repeating, especially from behind a pulpit. 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? Henson 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 21st century are learning to approach Jesus' originally subversive teachings, particularly those of us who find ourselves basically on the privileged and often-benevolent side of the equation. What, then, can we find in this parable that truly challenges us? Remember, the injured person is Jewish and Jesus' told this to a Jewish audience. Therefore, **perhaps we should pay more attention to how all of this is to be experienced and interpreted through the role and lens of the injured person.** 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...

Now, we all have our own cultural enemies, and we all have our derogatory names for them. [Yes, that includes those of us who identify as progressive.] They are slurs based on race [or ethnicity], on sexuality, on class, [on gender, on religion or] on political preference. **The parable of the Samaritan asks us to confess first that we have these cultural enemies** — be it an undocumented immigrant, a gay [or transgender] person, a poor person, a rural gun rights-advocate, or a [MAGA] Republican, [a homeless person, a fundamentalist, a homophobe, a staunch pro-life advocate, a misogynist. 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. [That is built into our cultural understanding of American Exceptionalism.] 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...**

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 [siblings].

The issue, therefore, is not “who is my neighbor?” Rather, **can we recognize that the cultural 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. And they call us to decide how to respond.

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>