



“The Pretty Good Samaritan”

Preaching Text: Luke 10:25-37

14 July 2013: 8th Sunday after Pentecost

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In the opinion of many, Luke is a literary genius. He has taken some of the Jesus’ gospel teachings and put his own imprint on the stories—much to our benefit.

From Luke we have these unique texts:

- *the Annunciation to Mary; illustrates the Gospel of Women (1:26)
- *singing angels (2:14)
- *Mary and Martha inviting Jesus into their home (10:38)
- *Parables of lost coin, lost sheep, and lost son (Chapter 15)
- *Parable of the rich man and Lazarus (16:19)
- *Parable of judge and widow (18:1-8)
- *Jesus heals the man whose ear is cut off (22:51)
- *the penitent thief (23:40-43)
- *Road to Emmaus (Chapter 24)

Often people project upon others their own psychological issues or feelings or traits, imagining or believing that the other person has those same feelings or traits. An example of projection is when an employer who lacks financial discipline accuses her or his employees of wasting resources. But identification is a whole other matter. Identification is a psychological process whereby a reader assimilates an aspect, property, or attribute of literary character and is transformed, wholly or partially, after the model the character provides.

Or identification is a term used in literary studies to describe an emotional relationship between a reader and a character. In both cases, readers see themselves in the fictional character. Whereas projection leads to problems, usually identification simply discloses our humanness.

So today, I ask: “With whom do you identify in Luke’s parable of The Good Samaritan?” Let us hear the day’s lesson:

25 Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” 26 He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” 27 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.”



28 And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.” 29 But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” 30 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.

31 Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. 32 So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33 But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. 34 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. 35 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.’ 36 Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” 37 He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise” (Luke 10:25-37).

So . . . again I ask: With which character do you most closely identify? It is an important question because how we answer will go a long way in shaping the parable’s meaning. First, few of us would identify with the lawyer. We all know that Luke tells us that the lawyer asked the question [only] “wanting to justify himself” and “to test Jesus.” We know that self-justification is not what Jesus is about nor is it a property for which Jesus looks with gladness. Thus, by the way Luke tells this story, it steers the audience from identifying with the lawyer. Not that we need much deflecting because scribes and lawyers are often in conflict with Jesus. This conflict with Jesus makes the lawyer unlikely to gain our sympathy (see, for another example, Mt 22:35).

Second, we may usefully lump the characters of the priest and the Levite together because they represent the Jewish clergy and hierarchy of Judaism. If we don’t understand Judaism, however, we might see these two characters as merely selfish. The truth is each probably saw the man in the ditch and assumed he was dead. According to Jewish religious practices, contact with a corpse made people ritually unclean. This is what made the man with a legion of demons so fearsome to Jewish readers/hearers of that story—he lived in a graveyard. Thus, when the priest and Levite passed by the man on the other side of the road, perhaps they were only being faithful to the ritual law. Few of us modern folk are so dedicated to the law that



we would fail to help someone to maintain ritual purity. After all, few in our society hallow the Sabbath and or pay much attention to Moses when he says: “You shall keep the sabbath, because it is holy for you; everyone who profanes it shall be put to death; whoever does any work on it shall be cut off from among the people” (Exodus 31:14). We identify with the Samaritan for our own reasons.

I will tell you mine as I could not guess your reasons for identifying with the Samaritan. I like him because he makes a choice. He exercises free will. We all like people who can be decisive and deciding. For many of us indecisive people drive us mad or at least senseless. Thus we admire those who can and will make choices. And if we do not have a choice, then we do not like it.

I am in a lot of grief situations and people sometimes get very angry in grief situations. I know because I am there. And as God’s agent or representative in that circumstance they want to know, “Preacher, why is this happening to my son, child, wife, husband . . . or whomever? What did we do to deserve this?” Being out of control—not being able to make a decision about something—it just makes us livid. Yet, in our lucid moments outside the ER, funeral home, or police station, we know that there are just some things we cannot control.

Let us not forget, however, that there is a lot that we can control in our decision making. The Levite and the Jewish priest made their decision and perhaps on good grounds, but so did the Samaritan. We can control much about our decision making. And although there is much to the Christian life we cannot control, there is a great deal of it that we can control through the ways we employ decision making. I want to say that making a decision separates a Good Samaritan from a Pretty Good Samaritan.

The Good Samaritan decides to teach Sunday school for the summer when all churches need teachers, while the Pretty Good Samaritan hopes someone will step forward because the children are our future.



The Good Samaritan decides to usher for worship because she knows how important a first impression is with our first time guests, while the Pretty Good Samaritan thinks “wouldn’t it be great if more people began to usher.”

The Good Samaritan decides to attend worship because it helps support the church and he or she can personally welcome visitors, while the Pretty Good Samaritan thinks “I wish that good singer behind me was in the choir.”

The Good Samaritan decides to be a good steward and support the church’s mission with more than lip service, while the Pretty Good Samaritan calls the church office and asks about the budget that he never intends to uphold. The Good Samaritan decides; the Pretty Good Samaritan vacillates and wavers as to whether or not he or she is in or out. For most of us the decisions that we make are not life and death. Yet people make monumental decisions every day.

James A. Wallace writes:

A year or two ago I read about a twelve-year-old Palestinian boy, Ahmad Khatib, who had been shot and killed by Israeli soldiers during street fighting near his house in Jenin, the West Bank. The boy had been holding a toy gun. He was taken to an Israeli hospital, where he died after two days. His parents made the decision to allow his organs to be harvested for transplant to Israelis. Six people received his heart, lungs, and kidneys, including a two-month-old infant. His mother, Abla, said, “My son has died. Maybe he can give life to others.” These parents made their own journey into the compassion of God and were living eternal life (Feasting on the Word—Year C, Volume 3).

These parents made a monumental and almost overwhelming decision with regard to who they were as people of faith.

With respect to making decisions in the Good Samaritan manner, I think Reinhold Niebuhr’s “The Serenity Prayer” can be of help to us. I close as we pray the first part of this marvelous prayer:

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can;
and wisdom to know the difference. Amen.

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Living one day at a time;



Sermon of Rev. David N. Mosser
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Enjoying one moment at a time;
Accepting hardships as the pathway to peace;
Taking, as He did, this sinful world
as it is, not as I would have it;
Trusting that He will make all things right
if I surrender to His Will;
That I may be reasonably happy in this life
and supremely happy with Him
Forever in the next. Amen. --Reinhold Niebuhr

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