

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ  
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor  
Sermon for July 11, 2010  
Lessons: Amos 7:7-13 and Luke 10:25-37

## GIVING US NEW CHOICES

We know what a “good Samaritan” is, right? A good Samaritan is a person who goes out of his or her way to extend a helping hand to a stranger, even when giving help is inconvenient and offers no visible benefit to the helper. A good Samaritan extends compassion beyond the limits of self-interest or obligation and even beyond any reasonable expectation of gratitude from the person helped.

If were to stop right there in our understanding of what qualifies a person as a good Samaritan, we would already have gone far beyond the boundaries of what many believe reasonable to expect from human beings. More than a few economists contend that rational people always act in their own self-interest to the best of their abilities to discern what promises to benefit them. To such a view, being a good Samaritan is unreasonable, foolish, and perhaps even harmful to society. If everything should have a for-profit motive, a for-my-own-benefit rationale, then people who set aside their own interests for the sake of strangers threaten the system. Jesus, as we find him in the gospels, threatens the system.

So far, however, we have only scratched the surface of Jesus’ “Parable of the Good Samaritan,” as we call it. The name is misleading because to the Palestinian Jews at the time, of whom Jesus himself was one, there was no such thing as a good Samaritan.

On May 28, 1869, U.S. Representative James M. Cavanaugh, speaking of Native Americans, declared in Congress, “I like an Indian better dead than living. I have never in my life seen a good Indian — and I have seen thousands — except when I have seen a dead Indian.” The Jews and the Samaritans of Jesus’ day were not in open conflict, but they avoided dealings with each other. The Gospel of John says, “Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.” So, “good Samaritan” may sound right to us, but it would have sounded all wrong to Jesus’ fellow citizens.

Look at the parable in Luke’s context. A Torah scholar trying to entrap Jesus has just embarrassed himself by answering his own question about God’s greatest commandment: love God in every way possible with all your capacity, and love your neighbor as yourself. To sound as though he really did have an honest question, the man asks Jesus further, “And who is my neighbor?” The man senses the problem. God’s command does indeed tell us to

give our neighbor's need equal priority with our own self-interest. So, if what would benefit me would harm my neighbor, I need to reconsider and change my course of action. Apparently understanding that much, the man wants to know how far God expects us to carry this willingness to modify our plans and forego profit for ourselves. Who counts as my neighbor? What he is really asking for is the limit: *Who is NOT my neighbor? Where may I draw the line? Whom may I exclude? Whose needs and interests are no concern of mine?*

I have little doubt Jesus infuriated his fellow citizens that day. He could simply have said they should extend their benevolence even to such a despised person as a Samaritan should they ever happen to find one in desperate need. Had he put it that way, they may have gulped but then agreed that, "Yes, in such a desperate case, I suppose I would condescend to assist even one of them." Few people, I hope, extend their hatred of some group so far that they would not even call 9-1-1 if they came upon a person of that group in danger of perishing. But since Jews and Samaritans arranged their lives to avoid contact with each other as much as possible, the idea of helping the other in extreme need would have remained conveniently hypothetical. Jesus reversed the situation by making the despised Samaritan the good guy, who does not just call 9-1-1 (so to speak) but puts himself out, even to expending his own money, for one of those who hate him, who look upon his people with disgust.

So, who is the Samaritan today? It depends upon who's asking. For the angry nativist who wants English-only legislation and thinks the new Arizona law a step in the right direction, this becomes the parable of the undocumented worker from Mexico who steps up and acts as the compassionate neighbor in the citizen's hour of distress. Conversely, it is also the parable of nativist who shows compassion for the undocumented immigrant in his hour of distress. Jesus gives the role of "hero," to the person I don't like and don't approve of — the one with whom I feel nothing in common and wish to share nothing in life. A line from one of our hymns haunts me frequently: "Races and peoples, lo! we stand divided, And sharing not our griefs, no joys can share." That's the problem Jesus addresses in this parable.

I wish I could still find the article, but I do recall its essence. Asked when Israelis and Palestinians would begin to make peace with each other, a rabbi said the peacemaking will start when the two begin to see the other's pain as well as their own. We could improve many conditions in our society if only we wanted to solve problems fairly rather than just to show our spite for each other.

Have you noticed the way Christians paint pictures of Jesus to look much as they look themselves? Japanese artists paint a very Japanese Jesus. African artists paint an African Jesus, and, of course, European artists for centuries painted Jesus as a very European-looking white man, and some seemed to imagine he actually spoke King James English. In one sense, that way of portraying Jesus as *one of us* is good and wholesome. He is, indeed, one

of us — “no more a stranger.” He is our link to God. In him we see God come to us with understanding and compassion. And God sees him in us, his sufferings in ours. So, if we paint Jesus at his birth or on the cross looking quite like us, that’s a true representation in a way far deeper and more significant than any literal portrayal of Jesus’ actual features. But, we stop there, and so we make wrong what could have been right. We need to take the further step of also painting Jesus to look like the person we exclude from our respect and compassion: Jesus, *the other* who is not one of us.

So, here we are on hot July Sunday in 2010, and Jesus, whom we call our Savior, Redeemer, and Lord, is challenging our prejudices and seeking to break through the barriers we maintain and defend to keep humanity divided — to prevent our sharing each other’s griefs and so insuring we will not share each other’s joys. But, you know, we get angry when our prejudices are challenged. *What about me? What about my pain? What about my rights? They caused the problems. They started it. They hate us and would overrun us or destroy us if they could.* Yet, at the end of the parable, Jesus does not say to his antagonist, “You are a terrible person, a bigot and a hypocrite.” No, he says simply, “Go and do likewise.” Show the respect you like to receive. Poke through the dividing barrier. Show some recognition of the other’s humanity. Stop parroting the hate speech, the slanders, the nasty little dehumanizing epithets. Stop feeding on anger and contempt.

We are all somebody else’s Samaritan. To someone, we are the type of people not to be respected but to be scorned, to be shouted down and treated with suspicion at best. Jesus is giving us new choices in our ways of responding to other people, to issues in society that affect groups currently at a disadvantage, and to hostilities in our divided and dangerous world. His choices do not come from a sweetly naive view of human kindness but, rather, from his own determination to break through the barriers, overcoming suspicion with proffered respect and turning enemies into neighbors. For me, as I thought about preaching yet another sermon from this Parable of the Good Samaritan and looking for something different to share, this final word from Jesus became newly important: “Go and do likewise.” That’s not a dismissal — “Go away, and stop bothering me.” — but an invitation to stop taking our own side in the suspicions, fears, and hostilities of the human race and start taking God’s side. Reach out, step across the barriers, and stop repeating our own grievances over and over until they drive us to an anger that takes us away from God. Jesus is telling us we can do it. We can become agents of God’s grace. “Go and do likewise” tells us we can make new choices. We’ll stumble, of course, but we can go forward. We are not doomed to our fears and prejudices or to the world of misery they create. Jesus challenges our prejudices, not to condemn us for them, but to enable us to break their grip and go forward into freedom. Amen.