

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
September 26, 2010
Luke 10:25-37

“The Semi-Good Samaritan”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

On Monday, September 6th, a Letter to the Editor in the *Daily Hampshire Gazette* caught my eye. The title above the letter read, “Adventure of a lifetime saved by anonymous act.” Here is what the letter said:

To the editor:

This is a belated thank-you letter to say 1,000 blessings upon the head of the anonymous person who found my wallet on top of a gas pump at the Hess station in Northampton on July 24. (Yes, I was that distracted; or, you may call me stupid). As a justice of the peace, I had performed four weddings (at 11, 1, 3 and 5 PM- although I said I wouldn't perform any, so that I could get to New York's JFK airport in time... but people called saying "please"). I was to leave Northampton for Peru no later than 6 PM for an adventure of a lifetime. My wallet had mucho cash, a credit card, driver's license, insurance card, an ATM card, etc.

When I stopped to get a coffee after getting gas I realized I didn't have my wallet. In a panic I drove back to Hess, but of course it was gone. I went home, cancelled the credit card, and thought, "Well, you're in trouble now." I stopped at the police station thinking perhaps somebody may find it in the bushes (the cash and card gone, but with the driver's license still in it) and would bring it to the station, so I'll report it missing. I said to the desk officer "I was at the Hess station and I ..."
He interrupted me by holding up my wallet and said, "Somebody just dropped it off." Stunned, I found that everything was there. It literally saved my vacation and reminded me there are still good people in this world. So, whoever you are, thank you. I'm sorry it took me so long to write this letter and I hope you see this.
Dennis Helmus

This is a good story because it tells the real-life tale of someone doing the right thing...without coercion, without expecting a reward. The finder would be considered a Good Samaritan.

That was not the case however when Ashton Giese lost his cell phone. (I read this in a magazine that was bemoaning people's lack of caring for one another.) Apparently Mr. Giese, a Defense Department analyst, was on his way home from work when he inadvertently dropped his cell phone on a Washington, D.C. street. When he discovered that his phone was missing, he frantically began dialing the cell's number from another phone. Finally a voice answered. "Yeah, I got your phone," said the voice. "What's it worth to you?"

This is not a good story. The man who found Mr. Giese's phone wants to be paid for returning to its rightful owner something that is not his. The finder might be considered a Bad Samaritan.

I like these two stories (which may be why I have saved them) because I get to say woo-hoo and feel self-congratulatory. I would take a lost wallet to the police station with everything inside it intact. I would return a lost cell phone to its rightful owner without asking for a reward. I must qualify as a Good Samaritan!

Well, not so fast. When the actual Biblical story of the Good Samaritan is read closely, we find that the parable is not about behaving ethically and demonstrating decency. Ethics and decency are important—returning lost wallets and cell phones is the right thing to do—but Jesus is making a making a different, larger and more significant point in the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Let's review what is happening in this story.

A lawyer asks Jesus, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus responds by asking a question in return:

"What is written in the law? What do you read there?"

The lawyer knows his Torah and he gives the perfect answer!

Quoting Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18, he says,

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.

Jesus affirms that this is the right answer, but the lawyer presses him with another question: "**And who is my neighbor?**" the lawyer asks. THEN, in response to that question, Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan.

It is a famous story we know well. A man, presumably a Jew, is on his way down the wilderness road from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he is set upon by robbers who beat him and leave him for dead. A priest and a Levite pass by him on the road, they do not stop to help him. They may have had good reasons not to stop, touching a battered body would make them ritually unclean. But the person who does stop and provide help is a very unlikely candidate to offer aid to a Jew, he is a Samaritan and that is what makes the story important and scandalous.

You see the issue of neighbor/friend as opposed to stranger/outsider was a significant one in Jesus' time. The lawyer who asked the question, "and who is my neighbor?" perceived himself to be a member of a covenant community. Like most people at that time, the lawyer questioning Jesus probably held clear ideas about who was within the covenant boundaries set by Scripture and who was outside. That was the norm at the time: there were friends and neighbors, and there were strangers and outsiders. And there was a boundary and a big difference between two.

Jesus is challenging and disrupting the social and religious norms of his time by telling a story in which a Samaritan is the hero. It is a radical message and a risky one to tell a story in which Samaritan stops to help a Jew.

Do you remember who the Samaritans are? The Samaritans are the people settled by the Assyrians in the district of Samaria who practiced a contaminated form of Judaism, their religious practices were mixed with Assyrian customs and cult rituals. Plus they intermarried with settlers from Mesopotamia. Samaritans were considered foreigners, strangers, and enemies of Israel. They were totally outside the Jewish covenant community, totally outside the friend and neighbor category. In Jesus' time, the term "Good Samaritan" would have been a laughable oxymoron.

The lawyer asks, "...and who is my neighbor?" And Jesus responds with a story about a Samaritan. What is going on here? What is Jesus trying to say?

The lesson of this famous parable is often presented as simple and straightforward: be compassionate, generous, caring and willing to help. And certainly that is a valuable message. But that more mild interpretation misses what Jesus is trying to convey....this is not a story about being nice. It is a story about how we perceive each other, who we consider a friend, and how we define neighbor.

Jesus is expanding the established boundary of who qualifies as neighbor, he is widening the circle, AND he is using one of the greatest pariahs of his time as the model of a good neighbor.

How often during his ministry Jesus would say: “You have heard it said...but I say to you.” This is an example of that, in this case Jesus is redefining neighbor. And notice how he does that, and who is perceived as neighbor.

Clearly the Samaritan, this supposed low-life foreigner, sees the man in the ditch as his neighbor. The Samaritan responds to the man who has been beaten as one would to a friend, with kindness, compassion and generosity.

But Jesus also wants us to hear this story from the perspective of the victim. The man in the ditch, the victim, is forced to see the Samaritan—this pariah, outcast, stranger—as his neighbor, as his friend.

In this parable, Jesus is re-defining stranger and neighbor just as he did throughout his life. In his sermons and his parables, with his table fellowship and his healing ministry, Jesus was consistently trying to break down the barriers between people. He dined with outsiders, he befriended outcasts, and he visited with tax collectors who made their living by extortion.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is consistent with Jesus’ often-repeated message of love and inclusion: we are all God’s people, there are no divisions, there is no hierarchy. We are not called to just tolerate each other, or to be nice in passing to one another, or just to display common decency toward one another...we are called to love one another.

This parable is more than an inspiring story about spontaneous compassion and a willingness to reach out and help.

It is about how we see the world and how we see each other.

The Samaritan, although ostracized by society, sees the victim as a person, a neighbor, a brother who needs help.

And the victim, although socialized to see the Samaritan as “the other,” untouchable, and outsider, sees the Samaritan as a person, a neighbor, a brother who will help.

The Good Samaritan story begins with a lawyer asking Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. And in response Jesus tells a story of a stranger despised by society helping a suffering man in need.

Jesus busts open the accepted definition of neighbor by saying essentially, we are all children of God, now treat one another that way.

Love your neighbor as yourself, you have read that in the Torah. AND BY THE WAY, your neighbor is everyone you meet.

The problem with The Good Samaritan story is that it sets the bar very high.

Jesus is telling me that I must move beyond ethical behavior, beyond common decency and love my neighbor as myself, and my neighbor is everyone I meet.

I think this is hard. I know this is a worthy goal and I know it is what I am called to do as a Jesus-follower, but I think it is hard.

I liked it better when I thought being a Good Samaritan meant returning a wallet with all the cash and credits cards still inside, or giving back a phone I find on the street without expecting a reward.

But being called to love my neighbor as myself and perceiving EVERYONE as my neighbor, wow, that is really hard.

I am a Good Samaritan when it comes to returning lost items to their rightful owners but am I a Good Samaritan when it comes to perceiving every single person as my neighbor and loving each person as I love myself?

The root of the word neighbor means “near dweller”—someone who lives close to you. But in the story of the Good Samaritan, the “neighbor” is someone who lived far away in the land of Samaria, someone foreign to the man who was beaten.

I have to recognize that when Jesus says love your neighbor as yourself, he does not just mean that nice family who lives next door. Jesus means everyone—far and near. The Haitian people rebuilding their lives following the earthquake, the people on the Gulf Coast still affected by the devastating oil spill, the Pakistanis reeling from the floods that ravaged their lands, the Iraqis, the Afghanis, the Hutus and the Tutsis.

Jesus is saying Andrea, they are your neighbors, love them as you love yourself.

Jesus is not buying the definition of neighbor as “near dweller” or someone of your own tribe or a person in your own community or someone of your own race, religion, ethnicity or background. According to Jesus, “neighbor” encompasses the stranger, the outcast, the pariah, the unwanted, the one far away who suffers.

As a Jesus follower, I am called to love THOSE neighbors—meaning all of humanity—as myself.

Today I am thinking that maybe there is a category between Good Samaritan and Bad Samaritan. Maybe there are semi-Good Samaritans...and maybe I am one.

I know the Good Samaritan story in the Bible, I know what Jesus' words mean, I understand the implications of this parable and I strive to do the right thing. But I also fall short. I think I am a semi-good Samaritan to my neighbors near and far.

But I also know that I am a work in progress. You and I, we are all works in progress.

As people of faith, we hold a vision, and we march toward it growing and changing along the way.

As people of faith, we recognize we are on a spiritual journey, we have not yet reached the promised land.

I may be a just a semi-good Samaritan BUT Jesus is walking with me and working on me, he is not done with me yet.

When we read Scripture carefully, when we take these lessons to heart, and when we hear Jesus' voice ringing in our ears, we can strive to live as Jesus lived, to be whole, loving, generous and compassionate human beings who see every stranger as a neighbor and every neighbor as family.

My beloved sisters and brothers in the faith...we are all flawed. But we are on a journey together. And it is our commitment to deepening our faith and developing more fully as disciples that matters.

And so may God bless us all, bless our struggles, our journeys and our growth.

May God bless our searching, stretching and striving.

May God bless all semi-good Samaritans as we live into the vision of loving our neighbor as ourselves and recognizing every person on earth is our neighbor.

Amen.