

The Not-So-Good Samaritan

Jim Benedict – Union Bridge Church of the Brethren
Sermon for Sunday, July 11, 2010, Luke 10:25-37

Remember the childhood motto, “Finders keepers, losers weepers”? It isn’t always so. Early last month, Joseph Craig of the Veterans Assistance Commission flew from Illinois to Utah to return a wallet to Robert Bell. Now, that’s a long way to go to return a wallet. Why didn’t Craig just mail it? That’s where the story gets interesting.

Craig took the wallet in person because it had been lost 69 years ago! At the time, Bell was 19 years old and serving in the Navy. Somehow, the lost wallet ended up inside a wall, where it stayed almost 45 years, until Bob Jordan, an electrician doing work in the building, found it. Jordan tried to find Bell, but had no luck. So he put the wallet away. 24 years later, he thought of it again. This time, Jordan got in touch with Craig, who with the help of his congressman and the Social Security Administration tracked down the aging Robert Bell. Bell was delighted to get the wallet back, because it included pictures of loved ones that he had considered lost forever.

Researchers in Scotland say that if you want to increase the chances of having your wallet returned, should it be lost, there is one simple thing you can do to improve the odds: carry in your wallet a picture of a smiling baby. The researchers placed hundreds of wallets on the streets of Edinburgh, all with the same contents except for pictures. Some contained pictures of a smiling baby, some contained pictures of a cute puppy, some contained pictures of a happy family, and others contained a picture of a contented elderly couple. Still others included no pictures at all. 9 out of 10 of the wallets containing the picture of the smiling baby were returned, while only 1 in 7 of the wallets without a picture were returned. Half those with the puppy or happy family were returned, and less than a third of those with the picture of the elderly couple came back. Strange stuff!

What would you do if you found a lost wallet? Ask most folks, and they claim they would do the right thing. But in fact, many don’t. Only a handful are as honest as Los Angeles based writer Andrew Cohn, who was cleaning up after a backyard party and found a wallet on the ground with \$40 in it. “I’d just spent \$500 on the party,” says Cohn. “I figured the money was the girl’s contribution.” He kept the money and left the wallet, with ID and credit cards, on the ground.

How did Cohn justify his actions? Well, he says, “If you expect someone’s going to return your wallet with all the cash, you’re probably a little delusional.” Davy Rothbart, who edits a magazine called *Found*, which features photos of lost objects, agrees with Cohn. “Really good Samaritans, if they find a wallet, they return it intact,” he says. “Some people find a wallet, take the money, but return the important stuff. That’s not evil.”

I found that expression interesting: “really good Samaritans.” It implies that there is such a thing as a not-so-good Samaritan, and suggests that most people would fall into that category. Nothing in the scripture we read suggests that Jesus would disagree. Most people don’t go the extra mile. But is that an excuse for us?

We can figure out the answer to that question best by going back over the story. Jesus is in the midst of his ministry and has become quite popular. This has raised concerns among the religious establishment. So one of them, an expert in the Jewish law or Torah, comes to Jesus

to ask a question in order to “test” him. The question is pretty simple and straightforward: “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

The Torah expert wants to know what Jesus is teaching and whether it fits within the mainstream of Judaism, or if Jesus is some kind of radical or heretic spreading a new religion or an unorthodox version of Judaism. The answer Jesus gives is about as “vanilla” as answers get. Jesus says something totally mainstream, totally acceptable - from a Jewish point of view, the “right” answer. Jesus answers with a question: “What is in the Law?” When the expert replies that the Torah commands us to love God with heart, soul, strength and mind, and our neighbors as ourselves, Jesus tells him, “You have given the right answer; do this and you will live.”

The Torah expert, however, is not satisfied. He knows that the devil is often in the details and the definitions. And so he follows up with the question, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus’ response is the familiar story of the Good Samaritan.

It is worthwhile to stop here, before the story, and think a bit about this exchange. What is going on? Jesus, it appears, isn’t looking to stir up trouble. He agrees with the Torah expert on what is most central to faith. It is the Torah expert who doesn’t want to let the matter go. He is the one who pushes ahead, and asks the next question. Why?

One traditional answer has been that the Torah expert must have been looking for trouble. He wanted to stir things up. He was “out to get” Jesus, to trick him. Certainly the gospels speak at other points about the religious authorities having it out for Jesus and trying to trap him. But I don’t think that is necessarily what is going on here.

I think the whole story, including the parable, makes more sense if we assume that the Torah expert was sincere. He was just doing what Torah experts did, and still do: trying to clarify the law, so that people could know exactly what to do in various circumstances. And if we are to love our neighbor, it certainly would help to know who our neighbors are. Of course, the flipside of knowing who is my neighbor is knowing who isn’t.

That is what makes Jesus’ parable so profound and challenging. Jesus introduces a Samaritan as the hero, as the one who does what is right, the one who behaves as a neighbor by showing mercy to someone in need. In order to understand what is going on, we need to know that Samaritans were the last people on earth that most experts in the Jewish law would have considered neighbors, even though they lived nearby. There is no need to go into all the historical reasons why, but we can say that Samaritans were despised by many Jews, considered unclean and to be avoided. Jews and Samaritans generally lived in separate villages, and had as little to do with each other as they could. Remember in the story of the Samaritan woman at the well, how she was astounded that Jesus, a Jew, would even ask her - a Samaritan - for a drink of water. The relationship between Jews and Samaritans was not unlike the relationship today between Jews and Palestinians - a lot of mutual animosity and distrust.

So for Jesus to tell a story in which a Samaritan is a hero, who does the right thing, while a priest and a Levite walk on by, forces the expert in the Law to confront his own prejudices and to see that ultimately no one can be excluded from the category of “neighbor.” Because of limits to our time, energy and resources, we can’t help everyone, but no one is automatically excluded. Anyone can be my neighbor. Anyone can be your neighbor. The question is, “Will you or I be the neighbor to someone in need?”

Jesus’ message to his followers is that the common standard we find in the world around us - we might call it the not-so-good Samaritan, or the good-enough-Samaritan - isn’t good

enough. Just doing as much, or even a little bit more than most people would do won't do. The poor performance of others is no excuse for us. For followers of Jesus, everyone is a neighbor. Every instance of suffering in the world is an opportunity to respond with compassion. No one can be excluded.

In a typical jury trial, both the prosecutor and the defense attorney participate in the selection of the members of the jury. Naturally, each side wants to exclude potential jurors who can't be fair or impartial. If either attorney can give reasons why the potential juror would likely be biased, any number of potential jurors can be excluded "for cause." But each attorney also has the opportunity to exclude a certain number of potential jurors without giving any reason at all - just because, perhaps, they get a bad vibe from the person or have a hunch that the person might not be open to seeing the issue the way the attorney wants them to.

That is the way it works in the courtroom, but not in the church, and not among Jesus' followers. We certainly can't exclude anyone from our love and compassion just because they give us a bad vibe or may not see things our way. We can't even exclude people "for cause," or even because they exclude us. Jesus calls us to love even our enemies. He calls for Jews to be neighbors to Samaritans, and Samaritans to be neighbors to Jews. He calls his followers to be neighbors to all.

So let us, like the Good Samaritan, keep our eyes open for the opportunity to be instruments of God in the lives of others. And when we see an opportunity, may we respond with courage and compassion, and a mercy as wide as God's own.

Amen.