

A Service of  
Cliff Avenue & Ellesmere United Churches  
Rev Kimiko Karpoff, diaconal minister  
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### **Not to be the good Samaritan**

When we think of the stories of Jesus that everybody knows, I would venture that the one called the Good Samaritan ranks right up there as probably one of the best known. It gets referenced even in popular culture. On the news, someone finds themselves stranded or in distress, the person who stops to help is referred to as a good Samaritan. Everyone knows what a good Samaritan is. Well, we think we do, anyways.

This scripture is what is known as a parable. It is one of the parables of Jesus. So, who can tell me what a parable is? (*listen for responses*)

So, let me tell you what a parable is not.  
A parable is not a straight up, straight forward story.  
It is not simply a fancy name for a story that Jesus tells.

A parable is a story that turns things on their head, shakes us up, overturns our expectations and understanding of the world.  
Crossan would say a parable is intended to "leave us standing on utter uncertainty." (Crossan) A parable should leave us feeling like the world is shifting beneath our feet, "because such is the advent of the Kingdom." The Kingdom of God not just questions, but shakes the very certainty of our reality and understanding.

Professor Harry Maier, my Synoptic Gospels prof, would say that a parable is getting on your winter woolies and gear to go skiing, and finding yourself on a beach playing with a beach ball.

The story of the Good Samaritan, along with other, particularly Lukan stories such as Lazarus and the Rich Man, are often told as exemplary tales. They are held up as examples of how we should live. We read the story and conclude that we must reach out to help those who are in distress. And of course, it's true that we should do that. However, that is hardly earth shattering. We know that God calls us to live in this way. There is nothing parabolic about that interpretation.

Part of the challenge for us is that we are too far removed from the context of the story. We can't hear it with the ears that Luke's audience would have.

When we hear this story, we most often cast ourselves in the role of the Samaritan, the person who helps the man who has been beaten and left half dead. We can see ourselves having pity on this distressed person and lending a hand. It's what we do, we good Christians.

Except those listening to this story in Jesus' time would have heard it very differently. Let me retell it for our time.

A regular at the local church gets waylaid while on the road. He is beaten, robbed and stripped of his clothing and left half dead on the sidewalk. A local pastor comes by on his way to a home visit. He sees the poor fellow lying on the sidewalk and pauses for a moment. It looks bad. But it also looks time consuming and he's on his way to visit one of the church's biggest donors, who also happens to feel that punctuality is next to Godliness. He doesn't want to risk the big donor reducing his tithe, and he figures that someone else will come along soon, so he says a prayer for the beaten man and carries on.

The next person who comes by is a church elder on her way to the UCW meeting. She sees the man, but isn't really sure that it would be safe to approach him. All that blood and who knows if he carries any diseases. Maybe he even was involved in something that caused this and she doesn't want to be seen to be involved in anything untoward. Although she feels a bit uncomfortable with it, she also passes by, figuring someone better suited to the task will come along.

Let me pause here for a minute just to point out the setup here. It's very clever. First of all, the audience would have heard the story expecting the man who was travelling to be one of them. But they're not really relating to him when he's attacked, so they're waiting to hear who they are in the story.

'Cause we do that, right. We hear stories and identify with the people in them.

So first a minister, a pastor comes by. Surely a man of the cloth will help. But the pastor does not. He knows his job pretty well, and that's to keep his church running. You don't annoy big donors who wield a lot of power in the congregation. So he makes a choice.

Then an elder comes by. She isn't so concerned about the power dynamics in her congregation, but she is worried about her own safety and the propriety of the situation. So she too keeps going.

Now the people hearing the story are expecting that the next person will be someone like them, just a regular good Christian who will do their Christian duty. But it's not. It's a Samaritan. So who is the Samaritan?

Here's Father Thomas Keating's explanation. He says that the "Samaritans were not only looked upon as outsiders, but as the mortal enemies of the nation of Israel and apostates from the Jewish religion. . . . A rabbinical text of the time states that 'one who eats the food of Samaritans is eating the food of swine,' this equating Samaritans as apostates from Judaism. For this parable's original audience, a Samaritan was the epitome of corruption."

(Thomas Keating. Meditations on the The Parable of Jesus. [New York:Crossroad Publishing, 2010] 91.)

So imagine for a moment that you are the one lying on the side of road, in pain, stripped of your clothing, more vulnerable and afraid than you've ever been. You see a nice looking man approach and you're so grateful, but he pauses, says a prayer then moves on.

Then you see a sweet older woman and think oh, good, someone grandmotherly. She looks at you with concern, but she too keeps going.

Then the next face you see, that face fills you with dread.

So who is it? Who would be your Samaritan?

Our Samaritan's will be different for each of us. When I was thinking about this, I was thinking that in a post 9/11 American context, the Samaritan might be a Muslim Arab. For some of us, it might be a gay man, for others a homeless drug addict, for others of us, a gun-toting republican, and yet others an Idle No More activist. My sweetie said his would be a Toronto Maple Leaf. (He's a Canadian's fan.)

In all seriousness, we all have Samaritans. Who are yours?

The Samaritan is the person whom we fear, or look down on, the one we are suspicious of. What would it feel like to have the person whom you fear most, show up at your time of greatest need, when you are in no position to refuse them?

This is the person that Jesus tells us is the key to our salvation. This is the one he asks us to learn from.

The story is framed by a question to Jesus from a lawyer. "Teacher, " he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus' response is to point the man back to what he already knows. "He said to him, "What is written in the law?" The answer, "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 neighbour as yourself." Jesus responds, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you

will live."

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbour?"

As he finishes telling this story, Jesus then asks of the lawyer, "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robber?"

Most of the time when we hear this story, we don't even hear the question right. We behave as if we think the man who was robbed is the neighbour we must help. But the question is clearly, who was that man's neighbour? And the answer is, "the one who showed mercy." The reviled Samaritan was the neighbour.

As David Henson notes, "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." We are asked to "sit at the feet of the despised other and see them as our way to salvation."

(<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/davidhenson/2013/07/jesus-doesnt-want-you-to-be-a-good-samaritan-lectionary-reflection-for-proper-10c/>)

Because this is a parable even that explanation isn't so simple. We are, in fact, every character in the story. The one who was beaten and receives succor from someone we despise. The one who reached out and helped his enemy. Because in this is the advent of the kingdom of God. That we heal and are healed by each other.

Now this is a parable. And it is the gospel of Christ. May we live the saving power of the parable. Praise to you Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.