

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 07/10/2022



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Revised Common Lectionary Year C

Sunday, July 10th

Luke 10:25-37

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Who is my neighbor?

The subject of this week's Gospel lection is the well-known parable of the Good Samaritan. This parable is preempted by a lawyer asking Jesus' opinion on who constitutes a neighbor. This was a topic of debate between the various rabbinic schools of Jesus' day. Rather than a straightforward answer, Jesus tells a story that has the typical shock value one expects from Him that turns the worldly customs upside down. There are three men who are familiar with the command to love one's neighbor as oneself. Each encounters a man in need. Only one of the three men lives out this command, the one His audience would least expect. Through this parable, not only does Jesus clarify who our neighbor is, He also clarifies what loving our neighbor requires. Jesus' radical inclusiveness on who our neighbor is has some equally far-reaching implications for our time.

Luke 10:25-37

²⁵ And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" ²⁶ He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" ²⁷ And 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 answered correctly; do this, and you will live." ²⁹ But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

The text reveals the intention behind the lawyer's question - putting Jesus to the test. In answering the lawyer's question about inheriting eternal life, Jesus responds with a question of His own. He asks the lawyer what the Law states and how does he interpret such. All the rabbinic schools in Jesus' time would have agreed with the first part of the lawyer's interpretation: "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." This is from the *Shema* (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). The rabbinic schools would have disagreed over the next greatest commandment. The more conservative schools would have argued the next greatest command was to keep the Sabbath. The more progressive schools would have argued the command to love your neighbor as yourself (Leviticus 19:18) was the next most important command. The response from the lawyer suggests he was a progressive and Jesus agreed with him.

The lawyer wants to know Jesus' opinion on who is defined as one's neighbor. Again, a difference of opinion existed between the rabbinic schools. The most conservative schools argued that neighbor referred only to fellow

students of the Law and thus referred only to scribes and Pharisees. Other schools had a broader definition of neighbor, but most considered neighbor referred to as fellow Jews.

³⁰ Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, 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, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. ³⁴ He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵ And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.'

The hearers of the story would have been familiar with the dangers of travelling this road. It was typical for priests to live in Jericho and thus the priest was probably returning home after his two-week assignment at the temple. Given the wealthy status of priests, the crowd would also have assumed the priest would be travelling with an entourage. The injured man is naked and half dead. This poses a problem. First, if he is naked then it is not possible to know his ethnic identity or social status. Even more than today, clothing would reflect much about ethnic identity and social class. If the man was dressed like a Law-abiding Jew, then the priest would have had a duty to help him. If the man was a Gentile, the priest would have been under no obligation. In order to be sure, the priest would have to take a closer look. Second, if he was half-dead then the wounded man may have appeared dead. The priest would become ceremonially defiled if he came into contact with a dead body. This would require going back to Jerusalem for a week-long ceremonial purification. During this time neither the priest or any member of his family and servants could eat from the tithes or collect new tithes. Distribution to the poor would not have been possible. The priest weighed the risks and decided to continue on his way.

The Levites functioned as assistants to the priests. It is highly likely the Levite in this story would have either been connected to the priest or at least known a priest was in front of him on the road. Since the priest had already set the precedent and ignored the wounded man, the Levite could hardly intervene based on his own understanding of the Law. This would be an insult to the priest.

Since there were three classes of people serving in the temple, priests, Levites and laymen, the hearers of this story were probably expecting the third character to be a Law-abiding Jew. Imagine their surprise as Jesus introduces a Samaritan! There was a long-standing hatred of the Samaritans by the Jews.

Samaria was originally the area given to the Ephraim and Manasseh, two of the twelve tribes of Israel. Later as Israel divided into two kingdoms, the northern kingdom called Israel encompassed Samaria. In 722 B.C., the Assyrians conquest of the northern kingdom took many Jews into captivity and replaced them with Gentile colonists. The remaining Jews intermarried with the foreigners and worshipped pagan gods alongside the God of Israel. Later, the southern kingdom of Judah was defeated by the Babylonians in 600 B.C. and many Jews were taken as captives to Babylon. After 70 years a remnant was permitted to return and rebuild Jerusalem, the Samaritans, the people who now inhabited the former northern kingdom, vigorously opposed the returning Jews attempt to restore Jerusalem and reestablish their nation. As a result, the Jews had no dealings with Samaritans.

As we know, the Samaritan responded as a neighbor. His initial reaction was not to think through an algorithm to determine the most opportune response based on the Law, the Samaritan was moved with a feeling - *compassion*. The Samaritan moved towards rather than away from the wounded man. His response was the gold

standard first aid of the time. He placed the wounded man on his own mount and took him to an inn and gave the innkeeper two days wages for a laborer to look after him with a promise to pay for any other needs on his return.

³⁶ *Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?"*

³⁷ *He said, "The one who showed him mercy." And Jesus said to him, "You go, and do likewise."*

As Jesus drives home the learning with His question, the lawyer responds not with the identity of the man who proved to be the neighbor, but defines the neighbor based on behavior, as "*the one who showed him mercy.*"

Reflections

The text does not specify if the wounded man was Jewish or Gentile, but given the location, the audience must have assumed the injured man was Jewish. What made the wounded man a neighbor to the three travelers? It was the fact that he was lying in front of them in obvious need. What defined the Samaritan's actions as a neighbor was the fact that he showed mercy.

The priest was perhaps not as callous as first appears. The priest appeared to have carefully weighed the issues at stake and favored a decision for the greater good which also enabled him to uphold his duty under the Law at face value. Perhaps we can see some aspect of the priest in our own decisions on who to help. There are often parallel complexities at play today when a local church must decide who to help and how. We recognize some charity can be toxic and end up worsening the plight of those in need. Sometimes our charitable acts can be an enabler for individuals to remain in their circumstances. Sometimes the church's help of one group can draw criticism from other groups that make it more difficult for the church to carry out its mission. Often local church charity uses third-party organizations which keep the whole thing sanitized. Member's hands do not have to get dirty.

The Levite had his own unique issues to worry about. Having the same legal issues to deal with, he also had to consider his "boss" had already set the precedence. If the Levite had acted, it would have undermined his boss, the priest. This would have had negative consequences for the priest and no doubt himself. Complex organizations and institutions are no different today and the church is no exception. Where hierarchies are necessary for operating things in good order, bureaucracies can often complicate the mission of the church.

Ironically, the Samaritan was free from the complexities that faced the priest and Levite. At risk for him was personal inconvenience and financial cost. Yet the Samaritan had to overcome the social taboos of his time and had no prospect of reward. Helping the injured man, the Samaritan would have still been despised by the Jews.

In this story, we are not called to send money to the innkeeper, we are not called to open a hostel for battered travelers, and we are not called to start a campaign to have the Romans clean up the crime on this road so that all travelers can be equally safe, not just the rich - all worthy social causes. We are, however, called to show mercy to the person in need in front of us - our neighbor. We are called to get our hands dirty in being the hands and feet of Christ. As the lawyer said, we are called to show mercy. Christ challenges us to *go and do likewise.*

The definition of neighbor comes under renewed scrutiny in the current Anthropocene Age where human activity is argued to have the greatest impact on climate and the environment than any natural process. We now must consider every other soul on the earth our neighbor. Our earth practices can help or harm people at the other side of the world. It is often the poor who are most impacted by environmental degradation underscoring the link between economic justice and environmental justice. Care for creation is thus fundamental to being a neighbor.