

## A Missional Life

Wayne Waibel – 07/10/2022

“Go, and do likewise.” A simple enough command. And yet, two leaders within the church of Jesus’ time could not be troubled to respond. The usual argument on their behalf is that to even touch one thought to be dead, by Mosaic Law was strictly forbidden. And the Samaritan was unbound by such law – therefore free to render aid.

I know that’s a pretty thin argument. Still scholars to this day invoke that very concept to explain all manner of truly obnoxious behavior. And the real tragedy is that the argument persuades so many. Thus raising the question, which is the greater transgression, the perpetrator, or the accomplice? Modern law holds both accountable, though to varying degrees.

While the parable of the Good Samaritan is perhaps the most well-known of all the Master’s stories, and arguably the richest in sermonic content - It is also the least appreciated from a familiarity point of view. Since we have all heard the story from our youth – we tend to gloss over some of the less obvious lessons. Which is why a critical review of scripture is always productive, if not essential.

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Evil is pervasive and tenacious; it is both personally embodied and institutionally perpetuated. There is big evil and little evil. While certainly a force to be reckoned with – we should – at our age – be somewhat adept at handling it. At the very least we should be able to get behind the concept that evil cannot be defeated in the world, only resisted in the self. We should know enough to let God do the heavy lifting when it comes to evil. This does not excuse us, however, from being pressed by God into service.

He engages in the quest for justice more often through the actions of individuals or groups than through direct intervention. It should not be difficult for us to ascertain what is right. At a very basic level, justice is a simple fairness. Whenever someone starts trailing off into superfluous details on one matter or another – it’s a good bet that they’re trying to cover an injustice. Don’t be confused by that – keep your understanding simple.

A common interpretation of the Good Samaritan is - the Priest and the Levite represent religious authority. The traveler who was besieged represents us, and the Samaritan represents the most marginalized and despised of our society. To put it in the context of modernity is too easy and runs the risk of overshadowing the point Jesus was making, but – let’s go ahead and do it anyway...

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There was a certain man who returned home from his tour of duty, and the first thing he wanted to do was put on his uniform and join a couple of his buddies at a baseball game. Upon arriving at their seats they were immediately set upon by the surrounding fans and verbally assaulted for their role in an unpopular war. They were called baby killers and worse.

People were angry, and taking their aggression out on these poor guys who could only watch in wonder as Security for the event walked briskly toward the exits.

Finally a pair of uniformed police showed up and escorted the soldiers out of the stands. They were asked to leave because their presence was causing the disturbance. Three men – having served faithfully and at great personal risk were being denied access to the great American pastime because of the prevailing attitude of an ungrateful nation.

The point Jesus was making was this, to love God is to love neighbor is to love God. The lawyer who tested Jesus in the first place could not even say the word "Samaritan," it was so utterly repulsive to him when Jesus asked, "Which of these three do you think was neighbor to him who fell among the thieves?" The best he could do was, "He who showed mercy on him." Right answer – but just barely.

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Grace is free, but not without cost. Jesus knew, just as Amos learned in our Old Testament lesson, that it is an unenviable assignment to be summoned by God to speak truth to power. But that truth must be spoken. And we need to know that those in power hear that truth, so we in turn know when that truth is dismissed, and by whom.

The clarity with which power disposes of the truth is alarming. The only real antidote is awareness and compassion. "That you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him," as written in the letter to the Colossians.

Paul spends a lot of time praying for the various fledgling churches scattered throughout the ancient world. While that most assuredly helped the growth and health of the church, prayer of the heart is the active presence of God's Spirit at work in one's life. And that is the side benefit which often gets lost in the execution of one's faith – the tremendous personal impact on one's life as a result of outward expressions of compassion.

Certainly the Samaritan was a thousand times blessed for his action, as well he should've been. But this story is not about blessing, it's about a simple kindness. And that intrinsic kindness lies within each of us. Even the Priest and the Levite. What we do with that tendency is the dividing line.

The Psalmist implores God to "deliver the poor and the needy from the hand of the wicked, for they do not know or understand; they walk around in darkness."

Amos was no prophet, nor was he the son of a prophet, but a sheep breeder and a tender of sycamore fruit. Then the Lord took him as he followed the flock and said to him, "Go prophesy to My people Israel." And he began to proclaim the word of the Lord – speaking truth to power.

The Apostle Paul reminds us that God has delivered us from the power of darkness, and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, in whom we have redemption through His blood.

And like the lawyer who wanted to justify himself by asking Christ to define neighbor, so he could know precisely whom he needed to love, received the stark illustration that all humanity, even our mortal enemy is counted as neighbor. We acknowledge the Samaritan as neighbor and are commanded to, "Go, and do likewise."

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There is in the human spirit a certain impulse to kindness. The world tends to beat that out of us if we allow it to. The good fight comes into play as we wrestle with the concept. It is an ongoing struggle that never fully resolves. Partly because the world evolves constantly, and the competition for our attention increases dramatically with increased knowledge and experience. And partly because the cost of enlightenment is due diligence coupled with acute vigilance.

Our way does not get easier with time; it gets muddier. This is not to say there is no leisure in our future. I think it more accurate to say that there is time for leisure, but a life of leisure will surely elude us.

As disciples of Christ – for us – there is no retirement really. Our quote unquote job – ceases to be that which returns silver and becomes more of a missional life. The aspirations of our youth give way to the challenges of wisdom – tempered with mercy and justified by faith.

The God of our father's has bestowed upon us the gift of discernment, whereby we inherit the skill and the intuition to reason through the challenges raised in a very broken world always on the brink of extinction.

But there are and will always be Samaritan's, both good and great, and a wealth of other undesirables traveling along the most dangerous routes – with a servant's heart. Giving aide – lending comfort – providing shelter – espousing the ideals we embrace as God-ward.

When we see them – we know them, and we remember that in the end, as at the beginning, we do not come to Jesus; he comes to us. Amen.