

Trinity 6, 2010

Twente (Arnhem)

Amos 7:7-end

Colossians 1:1-14

Luke 10:25-37

The Compassionate, Neighborly Samaritan

The parable of the 'Good Samaritan' is so familiar to many of us that we run the risk of switching off when we hear it again for the so-many-eth time. We know we should be like the Good Samaritan – the stranger who goes out of his way to help someone in distress. We should not be like the so-called religious hypocrites, the Priest and the Levite in the Parable. We've got the basic message, and aim to live by it.

But that approach may be too easy, especially if we miss the shocking details of the story, which bring home how much this little story Jesus told should challenge the way we think and live today, in the Netherlands, in the 21st C.

Three important words stick out in this parable: Compassion, Neighbor, and Samaritan. In fact, you could argue the parable should really be called the Compassionate, neighborly Samaritan, rather than the Good one.

We could add one more word to our list – 'inherit' – because that's the one that tips off the whole conversation Jesus has with the Lawyer who was trying to test him.

The lawyer comes up and asks: 'Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' We have to understand 1st C Jewish religion to pick up on why 'inherit' is important. The lawyer is actually asking about what sort of kingdom Jesus is inaugurating. Jewish Scripture asserted throughout that God's people would be eventually be completely restored (even resurrected [Dan 12, Ez 37], though the Sadducees were a bit less keen on that point). Further, the Jews were to 'inherit the land': Israel, of course, but also (Ezek, Sirach, Jubilees & Enoch) possibly the whole of the earth, in the end times. So basically, the lawyer is testing Jesus on whether the kingdom he is proclaiming is consistent with the Torah expectations.

That's why Jesus responds, 'What is written in the law? What do you read there?' And the lawyer dutifully quotes the Shema (Deut 6:4-5), '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.' The Shema is the single most important statement of the Jewish faith, repeatedly daily by the pious. The lawyer adds Lev 19:18, 'and you shall love your neighbour as yourself.' In Matthew & Mark's Gospels, Jesus summarizes the Law this way himself, but here in Luke, Jesus simply affirms that the lawyer hit the nail on the head. And he adds, 'Do this and you shall live.' Simple!!

But the lawyer is not satisfied yet. He wants to be judged righteous. So he presses Jesus: 'Who then is my neighbor?'

Jesus responds with one of the most shocking stories a devout Jew could have heard. We know the rough outline. But the grace of God (not the devil!) is in the details

A man en route to Jericho is attacked, beaten and left for dead. A priest happened by, saw the man, but scurried off. Same with a Levite. This behaviour seems despicable to us now, but was possibly rational. If the man were dead, and the priest had touched him, he would have been unable to accept the people's offerings and offer sacrifice in the temple. The Levite, who is sort of the stewardship officer and assistant treasurer, would not have been able to accept the people's tithes if he were ritually unclean. He'd have had to take 7 days off for purification. So both priest and Levite had strong professional reasons not to get involved.

Isn't that the challenge of ethics? There are always persuasive reasons not to be ethical when a real-world problem case arises. Someone's car breaks down, but we're in a rush and can't stop – got to get the kids to school or be at that meeting on time. An loose acquaintance is seriously ill or has lost a family member, but we don't know them well or don't know what to say. So doing nothing is safer.

I don't think Jesus wants us to feel guilty about all the lost

opportunities to do good we have let pass. He simply wants us to be more caring people. Whoever you and I encounter each moment of each day – they are the people the Lord places on our way. How do we respond to each? As neighbors whom we love as much as ourselves?

It was the Samaritan who proved exemplary. This would have deeply shocked a Jew, because Samaritans were heretics, classed in the same category as Philistines and Edomites. Samaritans had even been accused of religious atrocities, like defiling the temple by entering Jerusalem during Passover and strewing bones in the temple sanctuary and porticoes. A Samaritan village had rejected even Jesus' message. To a Jew, a Samaritan were the most despicable people possible. Yet a Samaritan is the hero of Jesus' parable. Consider an Al Qaeda or IRA supporter, and you might get a modern equivalent.

Yet it is this Samaritan who shows compassion. The word used in verse 33b 'moved with pity' to describe how the Samaritan felt on seeing the victim is the Greek word for the Hebrew word often used to describe God in the Old Testament: 'The Lord ... the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in love and faithfulness.' (Ex 34:6, and a good 20 other places.) This Samaritan who goes out of his way, who bandages wounds and anoints with oil, this Samaritan has the characteristics associated with God in the Old Testament. The Prophets speak of how God will bind the wounds of his people and anoint them. The parable challenges us to accept this kind of blessing from God from those we least like to associate with. Jesus asks the lawyer ³⁶'Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' The lawyer could not even take the word Samaritan on his lips. ³⁷He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'

The parable of the Good Samaritan. A better title would be 'The Compassionate, Neighborly Samaritan'.

We live in a remarkable world. We reap the fruits of the earth,

importing our bananas from the Caribbean, tea and coffee from Africa, S America and S Asia, wine from S Africa and Australia, and just about everything we wear or use from China or elsewhere in Asia. The products are welcome, but the people sometimes less so.

In the new global village, in the New Europe, where we rub shoulders with all sorts of folk, of all backgrounds and religions, the Parable of the Compassionate, Neighborly Samaritan (Muslim?) presses us: will we Christians accept God's blessings from those we find suspicious and challenging? And will we, in turn be a blessing to all whom we encounter, for the sake of Christ, who taught us to love God and one another? Amen.