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Sermon Summary #38

"Who is my Neighbor? Wrong question!"
Mark 12:28-34; Luke 10:25-37

Kitty Genovese was born in New York City in 1935. She was almost 29 years old when she was attacked outside her Queens apartment on the evening of March 13, 1964. Serial rapist and murderer Winston Moseley attacked her with a knife. Kitty screamed for help. Several lights in the nearby apartment complex came on, temporarily scaring away the attacker. Some of the tenants took notice of the attack, but no one came to Kitty's aid. Moseley then returned and once again assaulted the young woman. Again, lights came on in response to her screams, and Moseley again fled into the night. A few minutes later he returned for one final attack, ultimately leaving Kitty Genovese dead in the lobby of her apartment building.

Many believe that one of the primary reasons the people in Queens that night chose not to come to the aid of Kitty Genovese was their fear of prosecution or a civil lawsuit should something bad happen to the victim as a result of their attempts to render help. As a result, many states and countries enacted what came to be known as *Good Samaritan laws*. These laws were designed to protect those who might choose to provide assistance or help to someone in need, like Kitty Genovese.

As you can clearly see, such laws have taken their name from the story we've just read here in Luke 10. In fact, the terminology of "Good Samaritan" has taken root in our society and virtually everyone knows what it means. Unfortunately, what it means to most Americans today has little or no connection to the point of the story itself!

Before I go any further let me say something very briefly about vv. 25-28. Jesus is not endorsing the idea that by loving God and one's neighbor that a person can merit eternal life. Jesus is most certainly ***not*** advocating that we are saved by our good deeds of love! Rather, he is saying that eternal life **is** for those who love God and neighbor, not because by doing these things we earn the forgiveness of sins, but because **if** one has truly been saved by grace through faith he **will** do such things. Good works, such as love of God and neighbor, are the ***effect*** of saving grace, ***not its cause***. If you do these things you will live, says Jesus, not because they win for you eternal life but because they demonstrate that eternal life is already yours, by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

When it says in v. 29 that the man was seeking to "justify" himself, the point is that he obviously had put limits on his love. He had restrictions. He had rules that governed whom he would love and how far his love for someone might go. So if he can get Jesus to set boundaries on who is and is not his neighbor, he can say to himself, "Oh, I've loved other Jews" or "I've loved my family," so I must be in a good place with God. In other words, if he could get Jesus to answer his question by saying, "Your neighbor is your friend" or "Your neighbor is your blood relative," the lawyer can boastfully say to himself, "I've loved them. That must mean I'm ok." He could then walk away feeling vindicated and proud of himself.

But Jesus will not grant him that luxury. His story of the so-called "Good Samaritan" is his answer to the question, "Who is my neighbor?"

I wish it were possible to tell you of all the ways this parable has been interpreted for the past 2,000 years. Some of the examples are so outrageous that they border on the ludicrous. One example will have to be enough. Origen was an early church father who lived at the turn of the third century a.d. He argued that "Jerusalem" was Paradise or the Garden of Eden, that "Jericho" was the world, and that the man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho was Adam. The wounds of the man beside the road were his sins, the Priest who passed by symbolizes the OT Law whereas the Levite symbolizes the OT prophets. The point obviously is that the OT Law of Moses can't save us. The Good Samaritan, said Origen, represents Jesus Christ. The Inn to which the wounded man is taken is the Church, the two denarii refers to knowledge of the Father and of the Son, the inn-keeper symbolizes angels who are given the task of watching over Christians, and the promise of the Good Samaritan to come back and pay whatever is owed refers, of course, to the Second Coming of Christ at the end of history.

Such allegorizing of the text, of course, is baseless and need not detain us.

We are now ready to meet **the four major characters** in our story.

First, although Jesus doesn't identify this man who was on a journey, he was most certainly a Jew. Were he not, the whole story loses its punch, its sting. He is robbed, beaten, and left half-dead, probably unconscious. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho, descending through the desert, is approximately 17 miles in length. This road was notorious in ancient times for being a stronghold for thieves and thugs, with numerous places for bandits to hide undetected.

It's important to note that he was "stripped" and "half-dead" (v. 30). In the first century, travelers were able to identify one another in two ways: either by talking to a person and taking note of their accent, or by observing their clothing. In the case of this man, they couldn't do either one. He had been reduced to a mere human being, without ethnic indicators or markers to alert passers-by to his identity.

The first to approach him, according to **v. 31**, is a "priest". Although it doesn't say he was riding a donkey or a horse, we may assume that he was. After all, most priests were from the upper classes of society and would never have undertaken this length of journey on foot. The poor walk. Everyone else rides. Also, the parable is dependent on the assumption that what the Samaritan did, at least the priest could have done. The parable assumes that each man who came upon the victim had an equal opportunity to help him.

So here we have a priest, a religious leader, a man who is supposed to know God and thus to be loving and compassionate and caring, riding by, seeing the wounded man, and then steering his animal to the far side of the road and continuing on his way.

Some have tried to get the priest off the hook by saying that the reason he didn't help the victim is that he didn't want to incur ritual or ceremonial defilement by coming into contact with a dead body. Remember that according to OT law, you had to stay at least six feet away from a corpse or you became ceremonially defiled and were thus cut off the temple of God. This man was severely beaten, half-dead, and perhaps the priest feared he had already died.

However, the fact that the priest was traveling ***from Jerusalem to Jericho*** indicates that he was probably one of many priests who lived in Jericho and traveled to Jerusalem to serve for two weeks in the temple. If he is returning to Jericho **after** having served in the Temple, ritual defilement would not have been an issue with him. Furthermore, Jews were required to bury a neglected corpse. Showing mercy and respect for the dead in this way was more important than avoiding ceremonial defilement. Whether or not the priest, and later the Levite, thought he was dead is irrelevant. They had an obligation to help, either to bury the man or to find someone who could help him.

Next, we read in **v. 32**, that a Levite likewise came along. Levites were religious officials whose responsibility was to police or guard the temple liturgy.

Now this is speculation, but not beyond reason. People who have actually walked this road today point out that one can see a considerable distance ahead. In other words, it is highly likely that this Levite knew that a Priest was ahead of him on the road and that he had ignored the wounded man. Perhaps he said to himself, "Hey, I'm just a Levite. I'm not as important or as holy as the Priest. So, if he felt justified in not rendering aid, surely I don't have to!"

The bottom line is that **we don't know what motivated** the Priest and the Levite to ignore the man and pass by on the other side. Maybe they were afraid that the robbers and thugs who had bushwhacked the man were still nearby and may come after them as well. We'll never know. What we do know is that they were not justified in ignoring this man's great need.

Now we come to the central figure in our story. In **v. 33** we read that a **Samaritan** came along. That's not what we are led to expect. The order would more normally be, first a Priest (a man from the upper class), then a Levite, an official of a slightly lower rank, and then perhaps an average Jew, a layman, an ordinary guy. But no! Along came a **Samaritan**! What was a Samaritan and why is it so important to the meaning of this story?

The Samaritans were descendants of those who, following the death of Solomon (922 b.c.), had destroyed the unity of God's people and the monarchy. They had intermarried with Gentiles and thus were viewed by most Jews as half-

breeds. When the Jews returned to Jerusalem following the Babylonian exile, the Samaritans hindered their efforts to rebuild the Temple. In defiance of the Jews, the Samaritans built their own Temple on Mt. Gerizim and insisted that this was the only true place to worship God. In 6 a.d., during Passover, some Samaritans scattered the bones of a dead man in the court of the Temple in Jerusalem as a way of bringing defilement to it.

Jews typically cursed Samaritans publicly and in synagogues and openly prayed that God would never save any of them. **Two texts** in particular illustrate the animosity between the two groups. See **John 4:9 and 8:48 . . .**

But perhaps the most graphic illustration of the hatred that Jews had for Samaritans comes from geography. If you look at a **map** of the holy land in Jesus' day you will see that Samaria is located in between Galilee to the north and Judea to the south. They stand in relation to each other in the same way that Washington, Oregon, and California do. What makes this significant is that the Jews so despised the Samaritans that they refused even to set foot on their soil. If a person was traveling from Galilee in the north, south to Judea, or vice versa, they would first walk east across the Jordan River, through the Decapolis and Perea, and then back across the Jordan. This added countless miles and days to their journey, but it was a small sacrifice to make to avoid defilement by setting foot in Samaria!

To put it bluntly: in the Jewish mind **there was no such thing as a "good" Samaritan. That was quite literally a contradiction in terms.**

Jesus could have told the story with a Jew as the hero. It could have been a Samaritan who was beaten and robbed and a righteous Jew who overcomes his prejudice to provide him with aid. But no! It is the hated and despised and disgusting Samaritan who is portrayed as the hero, as the one who feels compassion for a Jew, something no Jew would ever have imagined a Samaritan could experience. On top of it all, Jesus portrays the Samaritan as morally superior not simply to a Jewish layman but to a priest and a Levite! This was simply beyond comprehension to a first-century Jew.

Jesus tells us in **v. 33** that the first reaction of the hated Samaritan wasn't self-protection or an instinctive turn to the other side of the road, but **compassion**! The Samaritan had a "gut level" reaction to what he saw. Don't forget, this Samaritan is **traveling in Judea**, not Samaria, making it unlikely that the wounded man is a kinsman or fellow countryman. In other words, he had all the same excuses that the priest and Levite thought justified their refusal to stop and provide assistance.

Also, if the Samaritan is going to Jerusalem from Jericho, he has just passed the priest and the Levite on the road and is therefore keenly aware of their neglect. If, on the other hand, he is traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho, they are in front of him. He is also probably aware of it and concludes that they have left the man unattended. He could easily have said to himself:

> "This man is a Jew who has been left to die by other Jews. If *they* felt no obligation to help him, I'm surely under no law that would require me to do so. After all, I'm a Samaritan. He's not my fellow countryman. Why should I risk my neck for a complete stranger, and a foreigner to boot?"

But that is not how love reasons!

Also, consider this. People who want vengeance for some crime that has been committed do not always think or act rationally. The family of this wounded man might well have laid partial blame for this incident on the Samaritan, as irrational as that may be. Consider, for example, what might happen if an Apache Indian in 1875 rode into Dodge City with a scalped cowboy on his horse. He takes him to the local saloon and pays for a room. Even though the Indian may have saved his life, he would probably be lucky to get out of town alive! Caution should have led the Samaritan to leave the wounded man at the door of the Inn and then quickly slip out of town. But again, that is not how real love and compassion think or act.

I also find it interesting how Jesus goes out of his way to demonstrate not only that the Samaritan did what the Jewish priest and Levite neglected to do, but that he also **made up for the actions of the robbers**.

> They robbed him / The Samaritan pays for him
> They leave him dying / The Samaritan leaves him well attended to and cared for

They abandon him / The Samaritan promises to return

The parable concludes in **vv. 36-37** with Jesus driving home his point.

Note how **he reverses the question of v. 29**. ***Don't ask, "Who is my neighbor?" Rather, ask, "Whose neighbor am I?"*** The question, "Who is my neighbor?" is the ***wrong question*** to ask. Jesus is saying that ***we can never conceive of any human being as a non-neighbor***, regardless of his race or country. As one commentator put it, "One cannot define one's neighbor; one can only be a neighbor" (Franz Leenhardt in Snodgrass, 357).

In other words, the parable is not about the identity of your neighbor. The parable is about your identity as a follower of Jesus. It is not about who he is but who you are. The question is whether or not you are the sort of person who sees yourself to be the neighbor of anyone who is in need.

All this is to say that love is not determined by the object of your affection and your attention but by you, the subject. The question is not, "Who is my neighbor that I may love him," but "Because of who I am and the nature of love I will be a neighbor to all." You cannot, you must not, **define** your neighbor, for then someone will always end up being excluded. You can only **be** a neighbor!

What, then, is this parable about? Let's answer that by first noting what it is **not** about.

(1) The parable is not designed to tell us that our responsibility is to stand beside the road and wait for people who are in need so that we might help them. The parable is not designed to tell us whether or not we should pick up hitchhikers or whether or not you should give money to panhandlers!

(2) The parable is not an indictment of religious leadership or the Temple. Neither is it an indictment of the upper classes. Some priests were poor. And we don't know if the Samaritan himself was rich or poor.

So, then, what is this parable ultimately about? What is Jesus saying to us?

(1) Jesus tells a story that **changes the question** from "What kind of person is my neighbor?" to "What kind of person am I?" We shouldn't be asking the question, "What sort of people are worthy of my love?" Rather, we should be asking, "How can I become the kind of person whose compassion pays no heed to status?"

The question about what kind of man is dying is not even in the story any more. The whole focus is now on the kind of people who are passing by. What kind of person are you? Are you the sort who first seeks to determine whether a person is the sort who is worthy of your love and compassion, or are you the sort who first seeks to cultivate a heart of compassion and kindness that you joyfully shower upon others regardless of their position in life and society?

In other words, Christian or Christ-like love does not permit us to choose whom we will or will not love. We are forbidden from putting people into categories in such a way that we are only responsible to love "our kind" or "our sort".

(2) This parable is also about the futility of a so-called "faith" that does not "work." The priest and the Levite would faithfully recite the Shema twice daily (see Mark 12), but their lack of love shows that their faith and confession and "belief" are spurious.

(3) This parable is a **stinging, damning indictment** of all forms of social, religious, and racial bigotry. It confronts head-on the sin of racism. It is a powerful attack on all forms of prejudice and feelings of superiority. The Samaritan didn't pause and ask himself the question: "I wonder if this guy believes the same things I do?" He didn't pause and say to himself, "I'm not about to help him, after all, he's a Jew, and I'm a Samaritan, so he worships in Jerusalem and I worship on Mt. Gerizim."

When an opportunity to show kindness and love comes along, are you deterred because by their clothing it is obvious they are Muslim? Are you put off because they are non-white? Do you find an excuse not to help because they are clearly from the inner city?

This isn't to say that the parable is telling us that what one believes isn't important. Of course it is! It can prove to be the difference between heaven and hell. **But the kindness of Christians must never be restricted to Christians, as if we are obligated to help and to love only those who share our faith**.

Perhaps the best way to sum up this story is by re-telling it in more contemporary contexts. Two examples should be enough to make the point.

> The parable of the Good Samaritan as told in white churches in the South in the 1950's and 1960's . . .
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> The parable of the Good Samaritan as told in Nazi Germany in the late 1930's . . .

So let me close simply by asking this pointed and painful question: To whom can you, to whom should you, be a neighbor today? Perhaps that annoying jerk who lives next door to you? Perhaps that co-worker who is a member of the *other* political party? Perhaps the hungry kid in the inner city? Perhaps the wealthy executive in the suburbs? Perhaps the man struggling with same-sex attraction? Or the woman who is attracted to women? Perhaps the divorced single mom?

Whatever the case, the issue isn't about who *they* are or what they are like. The issue is about who *you* are and what you are like. The issue isn't whether they qualify to be your neighbor. The issue is whether you will choose to be a neighbor to them.