

Sermon for March 5, 2017 Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Bill Chadwick Luke 10:25-37

I admit I was less than thrilled to see this passage, the “Parable of the Good Samaritan,” on the lectionary schedule for today. Holy cow, this is one of the very best known snippets of literature in the world. 90% of the adults in this room will have heard dozens of Sunday School lessons and sermons on this parable. What can I say that will keep people awake?

Well, I turned to two of the freshest, most creative and, I believe, biblically accurate voices around—my preaching idol, Barbara Brown Taylor (in a sermon entitled *Do This and Live*, ©Barbara Brown Taylor, Peachtree Road United Methodist Church Atlanta, GA, May 15, 2006); and Jewish biblical scholar Amy Jill-Levine (*Short Stories by Jesus*, chapter 2) who was a February Forum speaker here at Oak Grove about ten years ago and is the author of the book we are using in the Parables Class, net installment of which is this Thursday at 9:30 AM. I am deeply indebted to both Taylor and Levine for many of the insights in this sermon.

Taylor begins by noting that though this story is oh-so-familiar it will sound different depending who is reading it and hearing it. She writes:

Ask Valerie to tell the story and it comes out in her own accent, scented with her own breath. When she is telling it, all the characters sound like her. Ask Richard to tell the story and it comes out with more chin and muscle to it, though just as true. Ask someone who got beat up in a shelter last night to tell it and you will hear things in the story that you won't hear if you ask a lawyer to tell it. Ask a rabbi to tell it and you may be able to hear what a rabbinic story it really is.

I am reading from Eugene Peterson's paraphrase, *The Message*. Luke 10:25-37:

²⁵ *Just then a religion scholar (usually translated “lawyer”) stood up with a question to test Jesus. “Teacher, what do I need to do to get eternal life?”*

²⁶ *He answered, “What’s written in God’s Law? How do you interpret it?” (Like a true rabbi, you see, Jesus answers a question with a question.)*

²⁷ *(The lawyer) said, “That you love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and muscle and intelligence—and that you love your neighbor as well as you do yourself.”*

²⁸ *“Good answer!” said Jesus. “Do it and you’ll live.”*

²⁹ *Looking for a loophole, (the lawyer) asked, “And just how would you define ‘neighbor’?”*

³⁰⁻³² *Jesus answered by telling a story. “There was once a man traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho. On the way he was attacked by robbers. They took his clothes, beat him up, and went off leaving him half-dead. Luckily, a priest was on his way down the same road, but when he saw him he angled across to the other side. Then a Levite religious man showed up; he also avoided the injured man.*

³³⁻³⁵ *“A Samaritan traveling the road came on him. When he saw the man’s condition, his heart went out to him. He gave him first aid, disinfecting and bandaging his wounds. Then he lifted him onto his donkey, led him to an inn, and made him comfortable. In the morning he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take good care of him. If it costs any more, put it on my bill—I’ll pay you on my way back.’*

³⁶ *(Now here comes Jesus’ next question): “What do you think? Which of the three became a neighbor to the man attacked by robbers?”*

³⁷ *“The one who treated him kindly,” the religion scholar responded.*

Jesus said, “Go and do the same.”

This is living word, so each person’s perspective will be different. We can see this illustrated in how different people have represented this story artistically in different cultures and at different times:

These pieces (slides) are from “Art in the Christian Tradition,” a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, Tenn.

Van Gogh of course late 19th century Dutch impressionist

The Mafa people of French Cameroon in the 1970s

The sculptor is Francois Sicard. This piece comes from early in the 20th century and is displayed in Paris.

Apple orchard Paula Modersohn-Becker, Germany around 1905 one of the most important representatives of early [expressionism](#).

Comic Gunnar Bach Pedersen contemporary Danish artist

Donkey sculpture Gerard Bruning, Dutch sculptor, died 1987

Stained glass. Bourges, Cathedral, Bourges, in central France. The nave, the main part of the sanctuary, was completed in 1255.

Chinese art Prof named He Qi (hee-chee) Currently living in MN, has served as artist-in-residence at St. Olaf College in Northfield and with Luther Seminary in St. Paul.

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I find it helpful to see portrayals of biblical stories from a variety of cultures.

Okay. The Good Samaritan. We don't have time to walk through it verse by verse, so I'll just give you a few thinkwiths.

Jesus tells a parable. A man is beaten by robbers and left for dead. We really don't know anything about this man, what race, religion or political party he's from. But presumably he's a Jew.

He's in bad shape. But fortunately, along come three other men.

The priest and the Levite (a Levite in Jewish practice is sort of the equivalent in the Roman Catholic tradition of a deacon, lower than a priest) see the man lying there and cross by to the other side of the road. Many Christian commentators have explained their behavior by saying that they feared that the man was dead and if they touched him they would be ritually unclean and unable to perform their liturgical duties. How many of you have heard that? I think I've even preached it... That argument is a bit of an anti-Jewish polemic, and it simply does not hold water. First, the priest and Levite are on their way "down," which means they are not going TO Jerusalem. Jerusalem is on Mt. Zion, the highest point around. So they are going from Jerusalem, they've already done their duties and don't need to be ritually clean. Regardless, according to Levine, in Jewish teaching (three different places in the Hebrew scriptures) their duty was absolutely clear ...their responsibility was to save a life. It overrides every other concern, including keeping the Sabbath. Or, if they found that the man was already dead, their responsibility was to bury the man.

Levine concludes this section, *“The best explanation I’ve heard for the refusal of the priest and the Levite to come to the aid of the man in the ditch comes from Martin Luther King, Jr., who preached: ‘I’m going to tell you what my imagination tells me. It’s possible these men were afraid (their fear being that the man was only faking being injured and that if they stopped to help him, brigands would jump out and beat and rob them.)....And so the first question that the priest (and) the Levite asked was, ‘If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?’” But then the Good Samaritan came by, and he reversed the question: ‘If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?’” King went on, “If I do not stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to them?” King then went on to Memphis, (where the sanitation workers strike was taking place) and it was there he was assassinated. There are bandits on the road...*

So if the issue is not priestly purity, why did Jesus speak explicitly of a priest and Levite? The duo anticipate (sic), in good folkloric fashion, the appearance of the third figure.

Now this parable sounds a bit like the lead-in to a joke: A priest, a minister and a rabbi went into a bar... In Jewish stories there was an expected pattern. If you knew the first two you knew what was coming for the third. Shadrach, Meshach and...? Abednego, from the book of Daniel. Like today we recognize “Father, Son and ...Holy Spirit,” Or less theologically, “Larry, Moe andCurley.” (For you youngsters they were comedians who used to use physical humor, including poking each other in the eyes.) Can you think of other examples? Athos, Porthos and Aramis, the three musketeers. (I admit, I had to look that up to make sure I had the spelling right.) For Jesus’ audience, if they heard “a priest, a Levite...” they knew what the next person would be: an Israelite. (So you have a priest, a Levite and an ordinary fellow from the Jewish community.) A priest, a Levite and an Israelite walk into a bar, or whatever the story is about. But given that it is Jesus telling this parable we should expect the unexpected. So he doesn’t talk about a priest, a Levite and an Israelite. He says, “a priest, a Levite...and a Samaritan.” Samaritans for centuries were the hated enemy of the Jews. Amy Jill-Levine notes that “In modern terms, this would be like going from Larry and Moe to Osama bin Laden.”

According to the Bible Samaria had an earlier name, Shechem. It was at Shechem that Jacob’s daughter Dinah was raped... The second reference to Shechem/Samaria is Judges 8-9, the story of the false judge Abimelech, who murders his rivals... Thus, to Jesus’ Jewish audience as well as to Luke’s readers, the idea of a ‘good Samaritan’ would make no more sense than the idea of a ‘good rapist’ or a ‘good murderer.’

What's the equivalent for us today? How about this? There once was a man walking home one spring evening from choir practice at St. Luke's Lutheran church in Bloomington. On the way he was attacked by robbers. They beat him up, took his clothes, and went off leaving him half-dead. Luckily, a Roman Catholic priest was walking his way down the same road, but when he saw him he angled across to the other side. Then a Presbyterian elder bicycling home from a session meeting showed up. He also avoided the injured man. But then a cabbie, a Middle Eastern Muslim in a turban, driving his cab, saw the man, had compassion, stopped, gave him first aid, and then lifted him into his cab, getting blood everywhere, and drove him to Fairview Ridges Hospital. Before leaving, the cabbie left his credit card at registration saying, "If it turns out this man does not have insurance, put the bill on this."

Now here's what Barbara Brown Taylor said about the two men who refused to help. *Jesus does not go into their reasons because their reasons don't matter. All that matters in this story is what they do, which is to see the man and pass him by. You can count the verbs yourself—see, and pass by--two verbs each for the priest and the Levite. Whatever else they think, say, have faith in or believe, this is what they actually do...*

(However,) the Samaritan (count the verbs with me) comes near the man, sees him, is moved by him, goes to him, and bandages his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. He puts the man on his animal, brings him to an inn, takes care of him, takes money out of his pocket and gives it to the innkeeper, and asks the innkeeper to take care of the half dead man, saying that he will come back and repay whatever more the innkeeper spends. That's a whopping fourteen verbs for the Samaritan...

Taylor suggests that the key verb is the first. Without it, nothing else follows. The Samaritan "comes near." To truly be a neighbor we need to "come near" enough to see beyond the stereotype—see beyond the turban or the hijab, see beyond the political party label, see beyond the sagging shorts and blaring rap music of the teenager, see beyond the confused conversation of the person with Alzheimer's, see beyond the rigidity and fear—of the fundamentalist of any and every religion, see beyond the homemade sign of the panhandler at the exit ramp of the freeway, look into his eyes, and see a human being. Behind every label, even that of "terrorist," is a human being, a child of God. Every one.

At the end of the day, Jesus didn't actually answer the question about eternal life. He talked about the here and now. He said, "Come near...come near...so you can see...this child of God. Provide the compassionate care that is needed...love your neighbor (and your enemy) as much as you love yourself.

Do this... and live."