



Date: September 18, 2016

Title: "The Good Samaritan, Upside Down"

Scripture: Luke 10: 25-37

Description: Reading the Parable of the Good Samaritan, we presume that we are to take the role of the Samaritan, using our assets to help others in need. There are weaknesses in that interpretation. This sermon considers our role as the man who has been beaten, robbed and left half-dead, and is rescued by a figure he despises.

When I preach a parable of Jesus, I want you to play the leading role. "Be like the seed sown on good soil; be like the wise steward, ready for the master's return." Isn't that the whole point of the parables? Taking that approach, I wonder how much I've missed?

In this story, for example, what part are we supposed to assume? Well, who was Jesus "target" audience?

Once the nation of Israel was great. David was king. The territory and influence was expanding. Israel was becoming a world power. David's son, Solomon, built a magnificent temple. Israel had never been so certain that God was on their side and all was well with the world. But after Solomon, the kingdom split. The northern kingdom was invaded and destroyed by the Assyrians and the southern kingdom was besieged and a few generations later was ransacked by the Babylonians.

Consider these words again, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers..." Who is this man? This man is Israel. Israel had fallen into the hands of robbers and was stripped, beaten, and left half dead. Jesus is telling Israel's story back to it. But here is the crucial part. In Jesus' version, all of this happens at the beginning of the story, in the very first sentence. Jesus is saying the tragedy of God's people is not the end of the story *it is the beginning*.

And that is what some of Israel's people believed. When they were dragged off as political prisoners in Babylon, they hadn't left God behind. It turned out God was in Babylon too. God was not just a team mascot whose team had gone down in defeat. God was Lord of heaven and earth, of all times and all peoples.

God wasn't punishing Israel; God was suffering with Israel, was bearing the pain and grief of separation and longing that they suffered. And this Lord was about to restore Israel. And some believed this actually happened when they

returned to Jerusalem, initially as a flood of refugees in reverse, then as a trickle. They rebuilt the temple, they lived again under the law of Moses.

Others said no way. They were still dominated by foreign powers. They had not had their own king for 500 years, longer than America has been a nation. They have to live under the Roman emperor who thinks and wants them to think he is the real god and they have to live under scoundrel puppets like Herod. Things are so bad here.

Here is the question posed by the first sentence of the story. "A man traveled the road from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead." Is Israel robbed, stripped, beaten, abandoned. Is Israel "Lying in the gutter?" Or is Israel, like the priest and Levite, sauntering down the road, quite at peace with the world, safe in the knowledge that it has a temple. It is quite at home and its culture is secure. Is Israel in trouble or not?

"How's it going, Israel?" Jesus asks with his first sentence. If your answer is that all is cool, copacetic, *why are you hurting so?* Here comes your savior, the story says, walking down the road toward you. But be careful. Be alert. There are several people coming down the road; make sure you can tell them apart.

This pictures the parable as a story of a nation, the people of Israel. But the man may also be a single individual. Like many people, then and now, the wounded man experiences unprovoked assault, battery and robbery, leaving him in a desperate physical, psychological, and economic plight.

And the priest and the Levite offer him nothing.

But look at what the Samaritan does. The Samaritan is traveling. He is not a mountain rescue helicopter; he is not a police squad care; he is a person with a life of his own; he just happens to be on the road. But once he notices how desperate this man is, he has compassion for him. He offers practical help. He offers him healing now and the hope of more in the future. Then, (and this is very significant) *he goes into the city at considerable risk to himself to secure the man's well-being.* As a Samaritan, he was not welcome in that town, not safe there. He'd be viewed like a person wearing a burqa in a Klan rally. And the story ends with him promising to return to complete what he has begun. (The Samaritan is beginning to act a lot like Jesus, isn't he.)

At first, the parable of the Good Samaritan looks like a "social action" story. It's about a man who is in a heap of trouble through no fault of his own. The priest is so absorbed with his own purity that he shows no compassion at all. The Levite isn't any better. They're both concerned only with their own well-being and eternal salvation. When the Samaritan comes along, the "real" Christian says, "Ha! This is me." When Jesus says, "Go and do likewise," this is a clear mandate.

There are some weaknesses with this way of reading the parable.

Remember, Samaritans were despised, hated, and ostracized by Jews. Before we confidently assume the figure of the Samaritan is our role, we need to ask whether our own life has been one of being constantly despised, hated, and ostracized. Notice the one in the story who is despised, hated, and ostracized is *not* the one lying beaten and robbed by the side of the road. The despised, hated, and ostracized person is the one who does the *helping*. The way we usually preach this story, you'd expect the Samaritan to be the one in the gutter. Then we are

called to be the big-hearted passer-by, selflessly reaching out to the one the world turns its back on. But that is not the way the story actually works.

If readers assume they are the Samaritan, they take for granted they have all the necessary resources in their pocket—or at least on their donkey. That means the only people who qualify to identify with the story are people of means. Those who do not have medication handy and money ready to pay for accommodation do not get to do likewise.

This kind of interpretation makes it very, very easy for us to see ourselves as the agents of other people's salvation. It affirms our notion that we are the natural answer to other people's needs. The only question is whether we will be generous and considerate like the Samaritan or self-centered and heartless like the priest and the Levite. This overlooks the ever-so-slight possibility that we are the ones in the gutter, desperately needing salvation.

Maybe this is not just a story about us taking on the role of rescuer. Jesus is not Aesop, telling moralistic tales, the point of which we already know. Jesus's stories, as his gospel, turn the world upside down. The point of the Good Samaritan is not to promote noble generosity on our part. To teach that the healthy and wealthy should not be so preoccupied with their own well-being but should have a bit of concern for the stricken and the victim is not a bold new teaching. We already know that. This story of Jesus is about way more.

If we're not the Samaritan and we're obviously not supposed to be the priest or the Levite, then who are we? It's hard not to sound preachy here, especially to people who are pretty economically comfortable. We are the man by the side of the road. We are the one who is stripped, we are the one who is bruised, we are the one who is half dead. We are the needy ones.

By any standard or measurement, we are not needy. Our nation is not ruled by a dictator; our neighborhoods not ravaged by terrorists; our children don't go to bed hungry. The lawyer asked Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" That hardly sounds like the question of a man who knows he is desperately needy. It sounds like the question of a man who just needs to get straight where his legitimate responsibilities lie and where he can reduce his sense of guilt and obligations. But Jesus tells a story that shows that the lawyer and we are in desperate trouble.

Here's the good news. The answer to our problems is, miraculously, ambling down the road toward us. And it's the very last person we could imagine being any help to us. This person is a nobody. This person is more offensive to us than the robbers who have just stripped us and left us half dead. This is a person we assume is out to get us. This is a person we look down upon. We don't "do lunch" with this kind of person; we don't meet them at Starbucks for a latte. This is a person whose religion we despise and whose culture we regard as inferior. This is a man whose identity we cannot say without a sneer.

Everything in us resist the idea that we could have anything to receive from this person. If the roles were reversed, we'd be kind and generous towards this poor person and they would be grateful to us. But to see ourselves begging them for our very life? But listen to Jesus's story, the way he tells it rather than the way we want to hear it. We are the man lying in the gutter by the side of the road, and there is a figure coming toward us, and through our bewildered, bruised, and

bloodshot eyes, we see the figure draw closer, and we realize that we cannot live without him. Because in this despised stranger, we encounter Jesus himself.

Everything in us wants to hold on to the idea that we're the benefactor. We might get it wrong, like the priest and the Levite did—but we can still get it right like the Samaritan. When will we begin to realize we are as desperate and needy as the man in the gutter? Only when we find that God comes to us and saves us *through the person whom our life, our economy, our culture, and even sometimes our churches have taught us to patronize, feel sorry for, ignore, or even despise.* Those persons are not the objects of our pity; they may be the sources of our salvation.

The story teaches the person you most despise might be the agent of your salvation. The person I don't want to have anything to do with.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is not a moralistic tale that affirms readers that we are energetic and successful benefactors of the poor and needy in our community. It shows that we ourselves are desperately in need. And the form God takes to meet our need is the person we unquestioningly look down on and ostracize and distance ourselves from.

This is a moment Baptists and Pentecostals call "conversion." When we not only realize that we are desperately in need but become willing to embrace that our need is met by those we have contempt for.

Go, and see the face of Jesus in the despised and rejected of the world. You are not their benefactor. You are not the answer to their prayer. They are the answer to yours. Do not assume others will see Jesus's face in you; go and expect to see Jesus's face in them. Let your interaction with the weak and the poor and the losers come not from a sense of guilt or obligation or pity. Let it come from an overflowing hope that in them you will meet Christ. Do that and you will spend the rest of your life looking to similar people with the hope of meeting Christ in them.

This is not a moralistic story inviting us to be like Jesus. This is a parable about how we can be saved only if we are prepared to receive help from those we demean and despise, because they are the form Jesus takes when he come to us.

Then, and only then, can we hear Jesus's words, "Go and do likewise."

*This sermon was taken and adapted from a book by Samuel Wells, "A Nazareth Manifesto: Being with God." (Chapter six) Best book I've read this year.*