

Oh, here we go again, the all-too-familiar story of the Good Samaritan.

It's probably one of the best-known stories in the New Testament, especially by people who aren't religious.

We've named hospitals, nursing homes, relief agencies and philanthropic organizations after this Samaritan.

In the U.S., did you know there is even a Good Samaritan law, which says that anyone who stops to help a stranger on the road will be given certain legal protections because they stopped?

This parable has become so soft and familiar.

We sink into it like an old, worn-in sofa.

We get comfortable.

We start to hear it, our brain flips into 'familiar' mode, we might even tune out the speaker because we know what happens next, we gloss over the details because we know how this ends.

But here's the deal, this story was VERY radical when Jesus told it.

It was borderline, if not down-right offensive, to his followers.

But it has been told and retold so many times, the harsh edges have been worn down and it's now like a well-loved novel, with soft pages.

The problem is that familiar stories don't JAR us.

They don't startle us or cause us to jump up in response.

They coddle us, they make us feel warm and fuzzy, and that is NOT the purpose of this story.

We need to make it radical again, to remember Jesus' original intent so that we can faithfully live into what he was calling his disciples to do and what he still calls us to do today.

So, why was the story so challenging to the first people who heard it?

Three words.

Jews and Samaritans.

They were like oil and water or Palestinians and Israelis, or, dare I say republicans and democrats.

"These two groups disagreed about EVERYTHING that mattered.

They disagreed about how to honor God, how to interpret the scriptures, and where to worship.

They practiced their faith in separate temples, read different versions of the Torah and even avoided social contact whenever they could. They hated each other" ("Go and Do Likewise," Thomas, Debbie. www.journeywithjesus.net.)

So, Jesus is talking to a bunch of Jews and not only does he mention a Samaritan, but the hero of the story is a Samaritan.

Now, mind you, earlier in the Gospel of Luke, in chapter 9, Jesus' disciples, James and John offered to "*command fire to come down from heaven and consume*" the Samaritans (Luke 9:54).

Thankfully, Jesus rebuked them and said no.

My point is that the Jews and Samaritans had literally nothing in common and basically despised each other.

There is no perfect parallel, but imagine if I lifted up a member of the KKK as someone you should emulate.

You'd probably be really shocked by the person I chose to use as an example, and that's probably how Jesus' followers reacted when he chose the Samaritan to be the good guy.

And if that's not jarring enough, one of the people whom Jesus chose to use as an example of someone NOT to follow, was a Priest!

They were supposed to be the responsible, pious and faithful ones in the community.

But we know that Jesus has a fraught relationship with the religious authorities and this story is more evidence of that.

I think he's highlighting his disdain for them by saying, that not only did the priest walk by the man and not help him, but he saw him and *crossed to the other side of the road* to avoid the man!

I mean, we might be able to say, oh the priest was just walking and maybe he was caught up in his thoughts and didn't see the man in need, it happens sometimes even to the best of us.

But, no.

He saw the man and made the conscious decision to walk away from him, to avoid him and not help him.

Now, I could go into all the potential reasons why he did that (maybe he thought the man was dangerous, or dead, etc.), but that's not Jesus' point.

Jesus' point is that he's telling his followers to change their thinking, do a one-eighty.

He says, I know you think this way about these people (Samaritans) and this other way about these people (Priests), but I need you to challenge that.

I want you see your enemy as your neighbor and likewise, I want you to question and challenge those people whom you've lifted up as authority figures.

Jesus was blowing their minds, turning their whole world order and shaking it like a snow globe.

He messed everything up for them and then handed it back to them in a new way and said here, I want you to live like this... be the Samaritan, NOT the priest.

Now, we often hear about this text in conversation with who our neighbors are.

After all, the whole reason Jesus told this story was because the lawyer asked him, "who is my neighbor?"

The problem with thinking about who our neighbors are, is that it forces us to think about other people in relation to us.

It makes us the focal point of the relationship, around which others revolve.

We think to ourselves, I am here, in the center, and who are the people circulating around me who are my neighbors?

Who is in proximity to me?

I think we should be asking ourselves, not who is our neighbor, but whom can we be neighbors to?

The switch is a subtle nuance but it helps us reframe the relationship and take us out of the center.

We should be concerned with being neighborly to everyone we meet, regardless of who they are, whether they're Priests, Samaritans, Levites, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, rich, poor, black, white, brown, male, female or neither or both, old, young or middle-aged, able-bodied or limited in mobility, citizens or undocumented, refugees or settled folks with homelands...

we should take all those demographics and categories that we use to divide each other, throw them out the window, and see each other as people.

Full stop.

If we do this, then I hope we'd treat each other as if we are all neighbors.

And, while we are thinking about our roles compared to the roles of others, not only do we need to see everyone as our neighbor, someone we can help, or reach out to, we also need to be willing to have someone act neighborly towards us.

Sometimes it's easy for us to help others, makes us feel good, knowing we are doing the right thing.

There is also an undeniable power dynamic when you're the one helping someone else.

But it can be really hard to accept help or admit that we need help.

We are strong, independent, prideful.

Guess what?

Pride is one of the seven deadly sins.

We can't be neighbors to each other if we aren't willing to let others be neighbors to us, if that makes sense.

So, maybe sometimes we locate ourselves in the story as the Samaritan, maybe on bad days, we are the Levite or the Priest, but I hope that sometimes you are able to see yourself as the unnamed man on the side of the road.

"Maybe we have to become the broken one, grateful to anyone at all who will show us mercy — before we can feel the unbounded compassion of the Good Samaritan.

Why?

Because all tribalisms fall away on the broken road.

All divisions of "us" and "them" disappear of necessity."

This, my friends, is the role of the church, to constantly, consistently, chip away at the walls that divide us, until we all know that we are all beloved, that we all matter.

This is our job, our calling, to remind ourselves and the world over and over and over again that love wins, that care and compassion are stronger than hate and enmity.

You might think I sound like a broken record and that we hear this same message all the time, and if you think that, it means that we are doing our job.

Hopefully we do hear this message, in some form, all the time, in our church, and it's because we need the repetition.

You know why?

Because thought patterns are like riverbeds and the more often we have certain thoughts, the more the water runs over the bed, the more that pathway, that way of thinking becomes entrenched in our minds.

There will always be other patterns of thought, other value systems that you'll be exposed to, and those forces will try to make those riverbeds deep and entrenched within your mind as well.

The temptations of self-gratification and greed and power and fear of the other and beauty and sex appeal and wealth and approval from others, the messages we receive that tell us we should value those things, they will always and constantly be in our lives.

Those are the messages we live and breathe in the wider world, which is why we need the church.

We need the church desperately in our time to be the consistent drumbeat, which speaks in opposition to those messages.

This is why we need to come to church regularly, to support the church, to make sure that it exists in perpetuity for generations to come,

so that our descendants have a place to go to where they might be reminded that those values still don't have any power compared to the love of God made manifest in Jesus Christ.

Yes, I know it's stewardship Sunday, so I suppose the Stewardship Committee would be pleased if I mention the giving of our time our talents and our treasure to the life of this church.

As you are filling out those Time and Talent forms (which are slightly different this year, so I encourage you to take a closer look at them), and as you are filling out those pledge cards, please, please remember how strong those other voices are and how desperately the church is needed.

We are needed to remind ourselves, and the world, that that we neither Samaritan nor Jew, progressive nor conservative, rich nor poor, introverted nor extroverted, neither married nor single nor parents nor childless folks, neither college educated nor high school dropout, neither urban nor rural, neither American nor Middle Eastern.

We all have sacred worth, we all belong to each other, we must all live to serve each other and to be willing to be served.

And the church, both the church universal and our local church, will have a job to do until every single person on this planet knows that they are deeply loved and until every single person acts as if every other person is a child of God.

Please, this coming year, think about how you can support the church with your time, your talents and your financial resources,

so that we can continue to exist for many years in the future,

so that we can continue to carry out the job that God has called us to do.

Amen.