



CAMPAIGN OBJECTIVE: A NEW SOCIETY

Luke 10:25-37, 2 Chron 28:1-15

Blizzard Sunday, January 24, 2016

This is part of a series of messages on *The Politics of the Messiah*. As Americans we prefer to keep religion and politics separate. We tend to think of them as entirely separate categories, with politics belonging to the public sphere, while religion should remain private.

Yet it wasn't always so. Jesus made no distinction between religion and politics. He came as both savior and king, proclaiming a gospel of both salvation and justice. In the early church, people committed their lives to Jesus not only because of the promise of his rescue from sin and death, but also because he was setting the world to rights. It is only in the modern world that we began separating out the political and spiritual dimensions of Christianity. Consequently, we're prone to reading Jesus' story in the Bible in an overly spiritual way, while ignoring the political implications. We view Jesus as an expert on religion, and that's where we keep him contained, while muting anything he might have to say outside the tidy compartment we've put him in.

In Luke 10:25-37, a lawyer asked Jesus a spiritual question—how to inherit eternal life. And Jesus' answer, about loving God and neighbor, could be interpreted in a privately religious way. The lawyer could have done so, but he was uncomfortable with ambiguity. So, wishing to justify himself, he asked for further clarification. That's when Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan, a story connecting eternal life with social activism, tying together the religious and the political. At the end of the parable, the lawyer knew that eternal life, according to Jesus, would require costly, unpopular actions in the present.

The backdrop to this story is that it was almost Passover, and Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem to fulfill his destiny as both savior and king. Upon arrival, he would be wrongly arrested, falsely condemned, tortured and executed. But his death wouldn't put an end to his kingdom; it would instead signal its inauguration. Three days later, Jesus would rise again, demonstrating his victory over sin and death, and signaling that the kingdom had come. From that day on, all who swear allegiance to King Jesus would become part of the new kingdom.

Thus, Jesus was making his final journey to Jerusalem, and it was a whistle-stop tour of sorts. At every stop, he outlined his campaign objectives, describing what his kingdom would be like, and how people who join it should live. In this particular story, Jesus described the new society that he would establish as King.

In what follows, we'll consider the passage at three different levels of magnification. First, we'll examine the parable of the Good Samaritan under the microscope. Then we'll put away the microscope and have a look at its immediate context, the exchange between Jesus and the lawyer. Then, finally, take a wide angle view and consider what this means for us today.

The Good Samaritan under the Microscope

Jesus said, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead." Luke 10:30.

The road from the Temple in Jerusalem down to Jericho, some 18 miles northeastward, was notoriously dangerous in those days. A narrow, winding, mountain path descending 3500 vertical feet along the hills and cliffs of the Judean wilderness, where strong winds often sweep up dust storms. It was a great place for robbers to hide and to ambush solitary travelers.

We don't know much about the victim. Was he Jewish? Probably, but not certain. All we know is that he was a victim on the road, seriously injured, robbed, and abandoned to die.

"By chance, a priest was going down that road." Luke 10:31.

Don't miss the irony in Jesus' expression, "by chance." There's nothing random about it at all. Of all people in that culture, the priest was the person most clearly associated with service to God, consecrated to be God's special agent in the world. So it should come as no surprise that after the poor man was mugged, the first to "stumble upon him" would be God's official representative.

Not long after I was first ordained, I went to a clergy retreat in upstate New York. After driving many hours to get there through a lot of traffic, and already running late, I came upon a car accident right in front of the retreat center, blocking the entrance to the facility. I got out of the car to investigate. An elderly man had been turning left across the highway into the retreat center, and an oncoming car had struck him. I asked if anyone had called 911, and they had, so I just stood waiting for the authorities to come. When our bishop pulled up a few minutes later, he got out and ran right into the accident scene, to pray for God's healing for all involved. I hadn't even considered that I might be the first responder God had sent to the accident.

In Jesus' day, priests would serve two week shifts at the temple in Jerusalem. They often lived elsewhere and would come to Jerusalem when it was their turn to serve. We might imagine that this particular priest had completed his temple service in Jerusalem and then, having his mind set on other things, was heading home to Jericho for some time off.

The victim along the road had been stripped of his clothes and was badly injured, so the priest would not have been able to identify him by clothing or by accent. There was no telling whether the man was Jew or Gentile. If Jewish, then according to the customs of the day it would have been the priest's responsibility to care for him. But the victim might not have been Jewish. He might have been a foreigner, even an ethnic enemy, perhaps better dead than alive. Further, what if the man were already dead? In that case, touching him would have left the priest ceremonially unclean. Then the priest would have had to have turned around and gone back uphill to the Temple, not to lead in services, but to receive cleansing himself. It would have been another week away from home, and this time at his own expense rather than on the temple payroll. So the priest made a decision to avoid any inconvenience and not get involved. Nobody was looking. He just shifted to the other side of the path and kept moving.

"So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side." Luke 10:32.

The Levite probably didn't get involved because the priest didn't get involved. Levites also worked shifts at the Temple, assisting the priests, and then would return to wherever they lived. Perhaps this particular Levite and the priest were neighbors back in Jericho. In any case, they would have known one another after having served together in Jerusalem, and the Levite would have known that the priest was on the road ahead of him. It's easy to imagine him following the priest's example and passing by the victim on the other side of the road.

(How many times have I acted privately, whether doing something I shouldn't have, or leaving undone something I should have, only to discover later that others were watching and would probably follow my lead? I'm so thankful that my bishop didn't stop and stand with me at that accident, watching and waiting to see what would happen. He followed Jesus into the chaos, and showed me by example the kind of Christian I ought to be as well.)

In v 33, a third traveler comes along, and Jesus' hearers would have expected a Jewish layman to follow a Priest and a Levite. It was a common triad in stories of that time, just as we might expect other triads today. (E.g. "Papa bear, Mama bear and Baby bear." Or "A butcher, a baker, and a candle-stick maker." Or "Harry, Ron and Hermione.") In ancient Palestine, the way to summarize the totality of the Jews was in terms of "the Priests, the Levites, and the people." This series of three was repeated in exactly the same way dozens of times in the Old Testament. Note that it wasn't the Priests, the Levites, and all peoples, but specifically Jewish people, because these three groups together comprised the whole race. That's why we're certain that the next traveler will be a Jewish layman.

But he's not, which is what makes v 33 so utterly shocking. He wasn't a Jew, but rather a Samaritan, who most certainly was not coming from the Temple in Jerusalem.

During the days of the divided kingdom in Israel, some 900 years before Christ, Samaria was the capital city of Israel to the north, and Jerusalem was the capital city of Judah to the south. The two cities should have been friends, but they instead became rivals and bitter enemies. Both claimed to worship the same God, but Jerusalem had the Temple, and Samaria didn't want their people going to it. So they set up an alternative shrine to God in Samaria, featuring a golden calf, which went just as badly the second time as it did the first.

In 721 BC, the Assyrians conquered Samaria, and for the next 700 years wave after wave of Gentiles came from both Mesopotamia and Southeastern Europe to settle in what is now regarded as the West Bank. Consequently, by the time of Jesus, the people of Samaria—the Samaritans—were no longer Jewish in terms of ethnicity or religion or language or customs. That is why, in Jesus' day, they had become absolutely repulsive to the Jews.

For Jesus' listeners, it goes without saying that, if the priest and the Levite passed by without stopping, then of course the Samaritan would have as well. Yet he didn't. v 33. "But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion." How could this be? Jews viewed the Samaritans as violent, ignorant heretics. How could they even be capable of such compassion?

What's more, the Samaritan was generous: in v. 34, the Samaritan bound up his wounds with a compress of oil and wine. Then he put him on his donkey, and presumably he made the rest of the 18 mile journey on foot, literally going many extra miles on behalf of a stranger. He delivered him to the inn, and then he took care of the man himself. Then on the next day, v 35, he left the man in care of the innkeeper, with an open tab. The Samaritan gave the innkeeper two days wages as a downpayment for the total bill that would rack up by leaving him there. It was a lavish display of generosity. How could a Samaritan have done this? The animosity between Jews and Samaritans back then was like that of Israel and Hamas today. Jesus' listeners must have been shocked.

So that's what we see as we look at this parable under the microscope. An unknown, unidentified victim had been seriously injured, robbed and abandoned. Two Jewish leaders passed him by without helping. But a Samaritan had acted to right every wrong, providing him with healing, with restoration of property, and with room and board. The Samaritan, of all people, had been the one to show mercy.

Jesus and the Lawyer

Putting away the microscope, let's take a look at the larger story of Jesus and the lawyer. Lawyers in Jesus' day didn't know any separation between church and state. They carefully studied the Old Testament Law and then applied it in their communities in such a way as to promote Jewish nationalism and purity. Lawyers were the ones who taught that while one definitely should help an injured Jew, one definitely should not be contaminated by cavorting with Gentiles or touching dead bodies. As we'll see in a moment, lawyers weren't comfortable with ambiguity; they sought precision whenever possible.

The exchange between Jesus and the lawyer consists of a series of four questions and answers, starting in v. 25. Two questions, then two answers, then two more questions, then two more answers. Let's take a look:

Q1. And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, asking, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" Luke 10:25

It sounds like a religious question, but it was as much a litmus test for Jesus' political views as anything else. He wanted to see if Jesus supported his approach to religion and politics, namely, eternal life comes through strict adhering to the precise regulations of the Pharisees.

Jesus, not surprisingly, responded to his question with another question in v 26. Jesus said to him, *"What is written in the Law? How do you read it?"*

It was a brilliant response from at least two angles, the theological and the strategic. First, theologically, Jesus was affirming that a summary of the Gospel can be found in the Old Testament. A student of the Torah, like this lawyer, could know from God's word how to inherit eternal life. Jesus did not come to invent something new, but rather to fulfill what God had begun in his covenant promises to Abraham.

Secondly, from the perspective of strategy, the lawyer undoubtedly wanted to get into a discussion of precise details. But Jesus turned the tables on him, such that if he answered Jesus' question with minutiae, his pettiness would have been exposed. So the lawyer had to generalize instead, answering the second question—Jesus' question—with the same summary of the law that Jesus himself had taught elsewhere on other occasions. The lawyer said, v 27, "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, and your neighbor as yourself."

First a verse from Deuteronomy, and then a verse from Leviticus. Love of God and love of neighbor. On these two commandments, as Jesus often said, hang all the Law and the Prophets. So Jesus was very happy with this answer to question two, and as a result he went on to answer question one—the lawyer's original question—in this way, v 28: "*You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.*" Yes, Jesus was saying, *if* you love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and *if* you love your neighbor as yourself, *then* you will have eternal life. Jesus' point was that the lawyer must not only know and understand God's word, but he also must do it. If his belief didn't result in action, then it was dead and worthless.

For the lawyer, however, this first exchange left matters far too ambiguous for his tastes. Seeking further precision, he posed a third question in v 29, asking, "*And who is my neighbor?*"

It was in response to this question that Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan. But once again, instead of providing a direct answer, Jesus concluded the parable with another question, the fourth question, in v 36. Jesus asked the man, "*Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?*"

In asking this question, Jesus once again turned the tables on the poor lawyer. Instead being able to trap Jesus, he himself was trapped, and had to acknowledge before the crowd the obvious answer. Who proved to be a neighbor to the man who was mugged? The lawyer answered Jesus' question, the fourth question, in v 37 saying, "*The one who showed him mercy.*"

Having once again gotten an acceptable answer from the man, Jesus responded in turn to his prior question, and said to him, v 37 "*You go, and do likewise.*"

Jesus' response, though right on the money, technically did not answer the lawyer's question. Looking to justify himself, the lawyer had asked, "Who is my neighbor?" But Jesus turned the tables on him, so that the focus was no longer on Venn diagramming one's neighbors. Jesus, rather, asked who among the three travelers had acted neighborly. So Jesus' final answer remained imprecise: go and do likewise. Go and live like this Samaritan, and prove yourself neighborly too.

The Samaritan's compassion and generosity was astounding. It was a remarkable thing to be done for the sake of a total stranger, and probably one who was his ethnic enemy. So remarkable, in fact, that probably no one in Jesus' audience would have been believed it even possible. Had the lawyer not been a lawyer, he could have responded by saying that such a thing was foolish

and absurd, a red herring to distract everyone from what should have been reasoned discourse. But he didn't. Why not?

2 Chron 28:1-15 tells that story of when Samaritans killed 120,000 of Judah's soldiers, and then plundered the land, taking captive 200,000 of their survivors. But a prophet challenged them not to plunder their own kinfolk, and four Samaritan chiefs likewise called for a return of the captives. Consequently, these chiefs (28:15) "rose and took the captives, and with the spoil they clothed all who were naked among them. They clothed them, gave them sandals, provided them with food and drink, and anointed them, and carrying all the feeble among them on donkeys, they brought them to their kinsfolk at Jericho, the city of palm trees. Then they returned to Samaria."

The lawyer would have been familiar with this famous story. He would have recognized in Jesus' parable the very same compassion and generosity that the Samaritans had previously shown to Jewish survivors from Jericho. In the end, the lawyer would not have been able to say that Jesus' story was impossible, because it turned out to be something that many Samaritans actually had done before. Just as those Samaritans back in the 8th C BC had acted neighborly and shown mercy to their enemies, now Jesus was telling the lawyer to "go and do likewise."

The Wide Angle: A New Society

Now let's take one last step back and consider the story through the wide angle lens, in terms of how it applies to the contemporary world. Keep in mind that this story originally happened when Jesus was on the last leg of his "campaign trail," inviting the people of Galilee to take part in the new society known as the Kingdom of God. Now he extends us the same invitation. How shall we enter into and participate in this new society that Jesus was envisioning?

The first and most important way is of course through entering into a relationship with Jesus. There is so much good work for us to do, loving our neighbors. But it can also quickly become overwhelming. Where do we find the resources to go back out into a broken world again and again, with genuine compassion and generosity, showing mercy to those in need? Without Jesus, our tanks will quickly run dry. But as the Apostle Paul said, "I can do anything if Jesus strengthens me."

Jesus is the doorway into the new society that he envisioned and established in the kingdom of God. He is the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes into the kingdom of God except through him.

For those of us who have entered into a relationship with Jesus, there is clearly work to be done as individuals, as we "go and do likewise," showing mercy and being neighbors just like the Good Samaritan. Jesus wouldn't ask this of us if it wasn't imminently do-able. Unfortunately, it has become popular in some circles to say that the point of this story is to teach us how broken we are, and how utterly impossible it is for us to love our neighbors, so as to drive us back to the cross to be forgiven our unneighborliness. But that's precisely the opposite of what Jesus intended. In telling the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus used a historical example in order to emphasize how do-able this kind of mercy really is. If those who worshiped the golden calf in Samaria

could do it, then how much more those who had the Temple? And what about those of us today, who have entered into a relationship with Jesus and have the gift of his Spirit? We who have been adopted into God's family, who as God's children will someday inherit eternal life, how much more should we be able to love God and love our neighbors as Jesus commanded?

The point of Luke 10:25ff is not to discourage us, but to encourage us! It's a pep talk from the King to his lieutenants, spurring us on to love and good deeds as we establish his kingdom come. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we *can* love our neighbors as Jesus commanded. We too must go and do likewise.

Finally, what does this lesson mean for the broader church? It's noteworthy that in 2 Chron 28, the majority of Samaritans did not plan to be merciful to the Jews. But there was one prophet, Oded, who had the courage to speak out and say that it was the right thing to do. Then there were four Samaritan chiefs who did the same. Consequently, the Samaritan army pulled back, leaving the captives and the plunder in the hands of those four chiefs (2 Chron 28:14). Most of the Samaritans walked away and remained uncommitted. But those four chiefs did what their whole nation should have done, by acting neighborly and showing mercy to the 200,000 Jewish captives. *"They clothed them, gave them sandals, provided them with food and drink, and anointed them, and carrying all the feeble among them on donkeys, they brought them to their kinsfolk at Jericho, the city of palm trees."* (2 Chron 28:15)

This passage shows how a few people choosing to practice compassion and mercy can have profound international and political consequences. Isn't that just what Jesus said would happen in his kingdom? It begins small, like a mustard seed, but then before you know it, it's so big that the nations are finding shelter within it. Jesus' church may be small in number, but whenever his people love their neighbors in this way, the consequences are dramatic.

They say that "all politics is local," because what voters care most about aren't the big, intangible ideas, but the simple, mundane concerns of everyday life. You may have a good plan for dealing with Iran, but you don't stand a chance getting elected if your plan causes local gas prices to triple. In the same way, Christians can talk on and on about faith, but nobody cares if we aren't merciful to those in need. Gospel means "good news," and it ought to be so, not simply in a theoretical way, but in every way. Again, the early church grew because Jesus offered both forgiveness of sins and a new society, in which the world was set to rights.

Many of us are sad and frustrated by the current presidential race. Many are worried about what will happen to our country if one or another person is elected into office. But let's set all that aside for a moment, and imagine what our country would be like if all Jesus' people were to become neighbors to those in need. Imagine the political consequences of such action, regardless of who was elected into office, regardless of what laws were passed. Imagine the joy that we would have in loving people in this way. It's not fantasy. It's entirely possible. Would Jesus have told the story if it weren't? Therefore, let's go and do likewise.