

“A Compelling Question”  
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby  
Central Presbyterian Church  
July 15, 2007  
Scripture: Luke 10:25-37

It is perhaps the best known story Jesus ever told. The story of the Good Samaritan. The story of a man left for dead along the road. A story of those who pass by and one who helps. Within the twists and turns of this story, there are no fewer than three revolutions, three great reversals, that take place.

Once upon a time there was a man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho. And he fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped and beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead (Luke 10:30).

This was no ordinary road. This was not a flat highway that stretched out as far as the eye could see. This was the road going down from Jerusalem to Jericho. A dangerous road. Winding down the mountain, full of switchbacks and blind curves. Dangerous especially when the sun was at the wrong angle, or as the shadows began to fall. In a time of empire and resistance, even the patrols of Roman soldiers could not clear the road of dangers. Every twist and turn on this road was a prime spot for an ambush.<sup>1</sup>

And there the man lay, another victim to a dangerous curve on this dangerous road. He was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Half dead, Jesus says.

Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side (Luke 10:31-32). I am sure they were busy, these religious leaders. They may have been scared that it was a trap, one man used as bait for more robbers to jump out. And what could they do, after all? They were religious leaders, not emergency room doctors. And this man was half-dead.

The priest and Levite were respected religious leaders. And in the religious system of that time, purity was everything. One was either pure or impure. Holy or profane. And impurity spread like a disease. So, the priest and later the Levite could reach down and touch him, but then they would be impure. And if they were impure, they would need several days of purification in order to resume their religious responsibilities. And they did not have time for that. Besides, the man was half-dead, probably nothing they could do. So they pass by on the other side.

You have probably heard some critics say that that is the way religious people are – obsessed with ritual obligations and empty words and blind to human suffering. Religious leaders are hypocrites – too puffed up with self-importance and beliefs about God’s goodness to see what is really happening. To those critics, in this story, Jesus says, you are right. Religion

can be this way, but it should not be this way. Religious rites and rituals can make us miss the whole point. The priest and the Levite walk past the half-dead man.

But as Billy Crystal's miracle-working hermit character emphasizes in the movie "The Princess Bride," there is a big difference between mostly dead and all dead. The "Good Samaritan" with selfless concern stops and picks up the wounded traveler, treats his wounds and puts him on his donkey and takes him to the nearest inn and pays for his care (Luke 10:33-35).

"Go and do likewise," Jesus ends his story (Luke 10:37). And so the Good Samaritan is more than a story, it is a mission. The name of countless hospitals and healing organizations. For those who seek to follow Jesus, his "go and do likewise" challenges us to emulate the Samaritan. The Good Samaritan who does not give a simple handout, but gives comprehensive care.

A few months ago, when we had the exhibit of artwork by He Qi, a visitor came to church. After reading through our bulletin about our mission commitments, the visitor made a generous donation of the silk piece of the Good Samaritan, so that it could stay up on our walls. I was touched when I heard about the donation, and even more touched when I heard the explanation of why this particular piece. In the mind of this visitor, the story of the Good Samaritan best describes the mission of Central.

Revolution Number One. For Jesus, religion is about compassion, not purity. Faith is not blindly following rules and regulations, but about acting on compassion.

Too often, though, we forget the question that triggered the story. Our story begins with a lawyer standing up and asking Jesus a question.

"Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "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." And Jesus said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:25-29)

Why does he want to know the answer to "and who is my neighbor?" Is he earnest, trying to get it just right? Is he determined to get the best grade possible and so needs to know exactly what is required so he can exceed expectations? Is he a grade grubber, a brownnoser? Or is he testing Jesus. The lawyer with a sharp suit and expensive haircut politely cross-examining set to trap Jesus with an innocent-sounding but edgy question? "And who is my neighbor?"

According to the Torah, to Leviticus 19:18, one's neighbor would have been considered to be "the sons of our own people." Neighbors are our kind of people. Neighbors are those who live near us.

We have a great set of neighbors. Shortly after we moved into our house they introduced themselves. So that we would not forget their names, they said, “We’re Nick and Carol. Think of Christmas. Saint Nick and Christmas Carol.” Nick and Carol are amazing neighbors. Nick is a handy guy and has every conceivable tool and is willing to share the tools and his knowledge and his help without any hint of condescension. In the winter, every time there is a snowfall of any significance, Nick is out with his snowblower, clearing off the whole blocks sidewalks as well as the alley entrances. During the summer, Nick brings out his edger, and neatens up the entire length of the sidewalk, with Carol close behind sweeping the clippings.

Everybody needs neighbors like Nick and Carol. But their generosity begs the question, we can’t be nice to everyone, can we? We don’t have to shovel everyone’s walk and mow everyone’s lawn, do we? We don’t have to give money to everyone who begs for it? Like the lawyer, we ask if loving God means loving our neighbor as ourselves, well, who is our neighbor?

And so, like he does so often, Jesus responds to this legalistic question of who is my neighbor, not with a technical definition, but with a story. And the story he tells could hardly be more controversial.

A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him (Luke 10:30-33).

If we have heard the story before, we nod knowingly – yes, the Good Samaritan – and rush on to what he did. But the first time Jesus told this story, people would have gasped. A Samaritan?!

It would have been like, at the height of the Cold War in America, Jesus telling a story to an audience at a Chamber of Commerce Prayer Breakfast about a good Russian. “But Russians are communists and atheists!” someone would have shouted. The only good Russian is a dead Russian! Better off dead than red!

And I am sure some in Jesus’ hearing would have thought death better for the wounded half-dead traveler than to have to come face to face with a Samaritan. Samaritans and Jews were two groups undeniably at odds with each other. Different religions. Different ethnicities. Different countries. Samaritans and Jews. Two groups, passionate in their sense of identity, enemies. And with one short story, Jesus brought these two groups face to face on a dangerous highway somewhere between Jerusalem and Jericho.<sup>2</sup>

The question, “who is my neighbor,” has taken on a completely new significance now. Neighbors are not those who live closest to you. Neighbors are not those who share your beliefs, your ethnicity, your worldview. The Samaritan – no longer enemy, but good neighbor. This story could add greatly to the current debate about immigration policy.

Revolution number two in the story of the Good Samaritan. Jesus has exploded our practice of identifying our neighbors by ethnicity or borders or belief or birth. From the Samaritan enemy to neighborly good Samaritan.

In the end, Jesus says “go and do likewise.” But the story is about more than just what we should do, it is about identity. Who we are.

In Revolution 1, we put ourselves in the shoes of the Samaritan, willing to help while the religious experts pass on by. In Revolution 2, we gasp when we realize that Jesus thinks a Samaritan can be good. And we realize that we cannot limit our understanding of neighbors because of long-standing prejudices. In Revolution 3, our point of view changes.

When Jesus finishes telling this story to the lawyer, he asks the lawyer a question. Listen carefully. “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” (Luke 10:36). In Revolution 3, our point of view changes. No longer are we looking down at the man in the ditch deciding whether or not to help. No longer are we to be the hero in the story. Now we are the one who is hurt and afraid, waiting for someone to pass by and care for us. Now we are there waiting for someone who will be a neighbor to us.

“If Jesus’ point is that he wants us to imitate the courageous compassion of the Good Samaritan, the sad fact is, we can’t do it,” [says Tom Long]. “We are [rather] the person in the ditch, the one who lies helpless and wounded beside the road, the one who needs to be rescued. And along comes a Good Samaritan, a Good Samaritan named Jesus.”<sup>3</sup>

The last in the great reversals in this story, is to realize that we are finally not the neighbor with responsibilities to care for others, but the one lying wounded along the road. Patrick Willson writes

The extravagance with which Jesus describes the Samaritan’s action is not meant as instruction in first-aid procedures but as an invitation: we are meant to tingle with the healing sting of wine, to be calmed under the soothing caress of oil, to enjoy the relief of someone taking charge of what has become a nightmarish situation, and finally to experience the gracious welcome of being checked in at the Hotel Compassion, all expenses paid. Before we “go and do likewise” or go and do anything at all, we are meant to know the care and compassion of the stranger who finds us abandoned, lifts us up and provides hospitality to us. Far beyond providing instruction in practical morality, the actions of the Samaritan stranger open a window for us to recognize nothing less than the care and compassion of God.<sup>4</sup>

A lawyer once asked Jesus,

“Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” He answered, “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.”

And who is my neighbor?

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “I See the Promised Land,” A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr. (ed. James M. Washington; New York: HarperCollins, 1986) 284-5. Cited by Brad Ronnell Braxton in “The Good Samaritan in African American Culture” an article available by link from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Good\\_Samaritan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Good_Samaritan)

<sup>2</sup> Braxton.

<sup>3</sup> Tom Long will preach on this on “Day 1” radio program “Presbyterians featured on ‘Day 1’ radio broadcasts” by Jerry Van Marter, Presbyterian News Service

<sup>4</sup> Patrick Willson, “Who We Are” in Living By the Word in The Christian Century 26 June, 2007, 19.