

**A sermon preached by the Rev. Brian Bechtel
at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio
on July 14, 2019**

It is such a privilege and an honor to be invited by the people of St. Paul's to serve as your new Curate. And as your curate, one of my roles is to take my turn on the preaching Rota. When I found out that today, July 14th, was going to be my turn, I hurried to the lectionary readings to see what our texts were for the week, and lo and behold, it's the Parable of the Good Samaritan this week!

This is, perhaps, the most well known and popular of all of Jesus' parables, perhaps rivaled only by the parable of the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Familiarity can sometimes be a double-edged sword. On the hand, commitment to the Holy Scriptures as God's living Word for us is something shared across Christian denominations; undergirding all Churches despite their various differences. And for us in the Episcopal Church, we all make promises in our baptismal covenant to continue in "The apostle's teaching and fellowship," and the primary way we come to know the apostles' teaching is through study of and prayer with our Holy Scriptures. That's why we have VBS, that is why we attend Bible Studies, and that's why gather together each Sunday to hear the Word of God proclaimed in community! Familiarity with and knowledge of the scriptures is a beautiful thing, much to be desired.

Now, all of that notwithstanding, there can be an unfortunate side effect of overfamiliarity with particular passages, to the point where they can become clichés. The "Good Samaritan" is case in point. Almost everyone knows what it means to be a "Good Samaritan" – it's basically someone who goes out of their way to

help someone in need, whether that is giving money to a homeless person, or stopping on the side of the road to help someone change a tire. The lesson is simple: don't be mean like the clergy; be nice like the Good Samaritan. Now far be it from me to disparage anyone inclined to generosity and kindness! After all, such acts of charity certainly qualify as loving our neighbor as ourselves.

Okay then, you might ask, what's the problem with that understanding? There are at least **two main problems** with reading the parable this way, and perhaps more, but for this morning we will focus on two. The first Problem with the "Be nice and help people" understanding of the parable is a problem of **method, or approach**. The approach treats the text as a story with a moral, and getting the "moral" is the point. The parable itself is a kind of container, like a cornhusk, and the moral (be nice and help others), is the golden corn inside. It's the corn that we really want, and once we have it we don't really need the husk anymore. With this approach, every parable is turned into one take away lesson. So what the parable of the prodigal son MEANS is we are to forgive others even when they do not deserve it. Likewise, the parable of the Good Samaritan MEANS that we are to be generous and help those we see who are in need. The whole collection of parables becomes, at best, reduced to a set of moral principles or, possibly even worse, a set of moral rules!

So how should we approach parables? I suggest to you that instead of thinking of the cornhusk approach, seeking the "moral" inside of the husk that is the parable, instead we should consider parables as diamonds! When we hold a diamond up to the light, it sparkles brilliantly. The relationship of sparkle to

diamond is quite different than the relationship of corn to husk. Once we have the corn (the moral), we can just throw the husk (the gospel text) away, but the sparkle (God's revelation to us) cannot be separated from the diamond. They are inextricably bound together! The Gospel itself is Holy, and the fullness of its meaning cannot be reduced to an explanation, just as the beauty of a song cannot be reduced to an explanation of its lyrics, however scholarly. I find that holding a diamond to light to be a good metaphor for how we should approach parables to be a good one for another reason; and that is that we can always rotate the diamond, and the nature and character of the particular sparkle we get will be different. This is to say that the parables of Jesus are beautiful for their depths, and that we may return to them again and again to be renewed by how they speak to us; it is not a matter of simply going over the same thing again. This is one way in which the Word of God is active and dynamic!

Ok, so we have covered how the "find the moral of the story" approach, the cornhusk approach to the parables is the wrong approach. That **approach** is the first problem with the "help others and be nice" understanding of the parable. The **second problem** is the content itself. In this oversimplified "be nice and help" moral-of-the-story truly misses the challenge, the power, and even the shock of this gospel text. So let's hold up this gem of a parable to the light, and examine more closely some of the depth of Jesus' message for us that we miss by reducing the parable to a simple moral story.

Part of the "taming" of the parable comes from the fact that down the ages people have remembered the parable itself, just the part with Jesus telling the story,

and nothing of the context. It's easy to see why; if you're anything like me, then you probably have an easier time remembering Jesus' parables than you do remembering why he told a particular parable. While the RCL has its flaws, it does a great job today of giving us the context for the parable; the exchange between Jesus and the "lawyer." The same word is translated elsewhere as "scribe." This a man knows the law and he has come to test Jesus. There are plenty of places in the Gospels where the scribes and Pharisees try to trick Jesus, but it is not obvious that this is the case here. The man's intentions are ambiguous. We can think of him as representing a seeker, questioning the nature of our faith. More interestingly, I think the man can represent the "lawyer" in each of us. He wants to know how to have eternal life. He wants to know the rules of the game. He represents the part of us that wants strict boundaries, and logical categories for everything!

Jesus clearly recognizes the man for the Torah expert that he is, and asks him what is written in the law. Jesus is basically saying, "Look, we both know that you already know what you need to do." But the man isn't satisfied. He wants to know, in practical terms, how that is really supposed to work. The lawyer wants to justify himself. He wants an exact rule; he wants a strict definition of "neighbor." In other words, he wants to know who he is required to love.

It is to this line of questioning that Jesus responds with his parable of the "Good Samaritan." Jesus reframes and reorients the entire conversation with this parable. Notice that Jesus never answers the question. He never says who is neighbor and who is not. Rather, he shows how divine love; the love of God and of neighbor as self actually operates in the world. Rather than giving a logical

category, or a direct reply, Jesus tells a story; he paints a picture. And what a picture it is! This radical reorientation of thought and of purpose is part and parcel of the entire baptized life, and this is completely missed when we remember the parable without the context, and reduce it to a moral story.

Turning that diamond just a bit, what else do we see? We see that the Samaritan is not just a random stranger; he is an “enemy” of the Jewish people. The Samaritan is the despised outsider. Notice how the lawyer cannot even bring himself to say the word “Samaritan” when Jesus asks which of the three was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers. I can barely being able to get the words out through clenched teeth, “The one who showed him mercy.” The be nice and help other, moral of the story version, the cornhusk interpretation of the parable completely forgets this critical detail. Now for us, thanks mostly to this parable, “Samaritan” has nothing but positive connotations. To return some of the original challenge to us, we have to be honest with ourselves. Biblical scholar Amy-Jill Levine suggests that, when ask ourselves who our “Samaritans” are, that is, who are our despised outsiders? Perhaps people of a particular racial or religious background who appear very culturally different from us? Or perhaps they might be people with contrary political opinion. Or maybe even people who poor, or those branded for life by our system with labels like “felon.” Perhaps we have concepts like “deserving poor” and “undeserving poor,” therefore creating rules in our mind, and categories of who deserves our help and who doesn’t. And we can turn the whole thing around and imagine ourselves and the man who fell into the hands of

robbers, and then ask ourselves honestly if there are any groups of people we would refuse help from, no matter the circumstances.

Jesus shows us that, as Christians, we must work to eliminate these absolute mental boundaries that separate us from one another. It is the Samaritan – the hated other – who is the neighbor. It is the religious other who has already inherited eternal life, here and now, because although he was hated, he returned hatred with love. Through our Scripture today, our Risen Lord is inviting each of us to “Go and do likewise.” AMEN