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Luke 10:25-37

First Message

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WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?

SERIES: PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM

When my wife and I decided to remodel our home a few years ago, we called a good friend who is a building contractor to ask for his suggestions. I had a fairly good idea of what I wanted done, but my friend's remodeling concepts went way beyond anything I envisioned. I could never have imagined the things he came up with. Much to my wife's chagrin, we finally settled on my original, limited plan.

Have you noticed that God continually surprises us by expanding our limited concepts of who he is, demolishing our theological grids in the process? We go to him with some limited concept, but then he "blows out the walls," so to speak. Jesus was a master at this. Whenever he was asked a question, his response invariably stretched the mind of his questioner. This was particularly evident in the parables, as we will see today in the first of a series of messages in the parables of Jesus, from the gospel of Luke.

We live in a tangible, visible world. Things have shape, color, dimension. As Christians, we face a daunting challenge. We are aware that we are surrounded by invisible realities, yet it is difficult to discern them because we are constantly bombarded by the visible and the tangible. We need to learn to "see" with the eyes of our hearts the invisible dimensions of life, and then begin living on this basis, while yet continuing to live in the physical world. How can we accomplish this? In the Scriptures, we find the answer to our dilemma. In particular, the words of Jesus in the parables will help us enter into the realm of the invisible spiritual realities.

The gospel of Luke devotes a considerable section of text, 9:51–19:28, to the parables of Jesus. Luke's gospel breaks down roughly into three sections: chapters 1–9 deal with Jesus' ministry in Galilee; chapters 9–19 deal with the time he spent in Samaria with the disciples while on his way to Jerusalem; and chapters 19–24 deal with events in Jerusalem, culminating in his crucifixion and resurrection.

It is important to note this three-part outline of the gospel of Luke, for two reasons.¹ The first has to do with language. Jesus used three different kinds of speech, or language, a style for each location. The first, which he used in the three years of his ministry in Galilee when he taught his disciples, is called *didache*. This aspect of his ministry concluded in Caesarea Philippi, around the time when Peter declared that Jesus was the Christ. Today, this kind of teaching comes in response to the truth of God at work among us—how things are, how they work, in other words. Its language shapes our minds and heightens our awareness, instructing us in basic spiritual things.

Kerygma, or proclamation, was the second form of speech used by Jesus. This was the kind of speech he utilized during the events that occurred in Jerusalem, covering a period of about one week. *Kerygma* is a response to an event or action. Journalism is a form of kerygmatic speech. The *kerygma*, therefore, is the proclamation of the heart of the gospel, a proclamation that leads to conversion and repentance.

The third form of speech was used by Jesus during the three months or so he and his disciples spent in Samaria while they were on their way to Jerusalem, he spoke in parables. Eugene Peterson calls the language of the parables *paraklesis* speech. It is the language of the Holy Spirit, a language that cultivates awareness without giving direction. It is urgent, yet does not seem hurried. It is intense, but not overbearing. In our modern world, most of us are familiar with teaching and proclamation, but we have lost the ability, the thoughtfulness to speak the language of the Holy Spirit.

The parables are rooted in context, in the soil of the Scripture, but they are not conspicuous. The language that is employed forces one to go much deeper than mere surface conversation. Sometimes people will not listen to direct speech, like teaching or proclamation, but the parables have the capacity to enter through the side door of their minds, as it were. To borrow a phrase from Emily Dickinson, parables "tell it slant." Parables do not try to force their way through the front door; they come in from the side, catching us off guard. Jesus wonderfully demonstrated how the language of the Holy Spirit can penetrate the mind because the parables "tell it slant." The parables, therefore, will be extremely helpful in this area because they illustrate this way of speaking.

Besides the three types of speech represented in these three areas of our Lord's ministry, there are three places where ministry and learning occur. Galilee corresponds to home. It is familiar, comfortable, safe. Jerusalem, on the other hand, corresponds to the place of crisis—the final destination, the location for the crucifixion, the event for which Jesus came. Samaria was in-between. It wasn't home, so it wasn't comfortable, but neither was it the final destination. Samaria corresponds to a time of wandering, where things aren't clear and where we don't receive quick-fix instruction. There the disciples were trained to learn this way of relating, trained in the language of the Holy Spirit, trained in the language of prayer. Samaria was where they received spiritual direction. God wanted to teach them to simply "be," to rest and allow the life of Christ and the teaching of Christ to sink deep into their minds.

The parables of Jesus will help us recover a lost language because they teach us about being in Samaria, the in-between place. At some point in our lives all of us will find ourselves here. We are not at home, but neither have we reached our destination. We want hard answers, but there are none obvious. When we ask questions, Jesus responds by telling us stories. This time is as important for us as it was for the disciples. As we study the parables, therefore, we need to try and envision ourselves walking with Jesus and the disciples in Samaria. We are being trained; we are learning the language of the Holy Spirit.

The first parable we will look at is the well known story of the Good Samaritan. The biblical principles in this story are quite obvious, but what the parable asks us to do is extremely radical. The context is one of excitement and success. Jesus had sent out the 72

disciples to minister, and they had returned with success stories of healings and casting out demons. But now comes a warning. Jesus admonishes them and us: do not celebrate for what we do, but for what we are.

Luke 10:25:

And behold, a certain lawyer stood up and put Him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" And He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How does it read to you?" And he answered and said, "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 He said to him, "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live." But wishing to justify himself, he said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied and said, "A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho; and he fell among robbers, and they stripped him and beat him, and went off leaving him half dead. And by chance a certain priest was going down on that road, and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. And likewise a Levite also, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a certain Samaritan, who was on a journey, came upon him; and when he saw him, he felt compassion, and came to him, and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them; and he put him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And on the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper and said, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I return, I will repay you.' Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers' hands?" And he said, "The one who showed mercy toward him." And Jesus said to him, "Go and do the same." (Luke 10:25-37 NASB)

This parable was provoked by the question of an unknown pagan. He was a Bible student, a *nomikos*, a scribe who watch-dogged people who spoke Torah. This law expert wanted to test Jesus, but not in a hostile fashion. He merely wanted to know whether he was genuine. People were gullible, especially with regard to matters of religion, so testing was required. It is interesting to note that Jesus was tested in all three locations where he ministered. In Galilee, he was tested in the wilderness; in Samaria, he was tested by this scribe; and in Jerusalem, he would be tested at the cross. If we are to follow him, it is good to remember that our Savior was tested.

There are two rounds in this encounter between the scribe and Jesus. Notice that in both rounds Jesus reversed the testing: first, he was tested, then the scribe was tested. The scribe began by asking a question, his field of expertise: "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" He used the first person, which tends to be a disarming approach. He was asking for personal advice. Jesus, however, responded with a question of his own, which had the effect of putting them both on an equal footing: "What is written in the Law?" he asked. The expert answered well, and Jesus gave him his approval, telling the man that if he did this, he would live. There is no doubt that Jesus was referring to the immediate future; i.e. if the man did this he would come alive. (The verb "to do" is a present imperative, meaning "keep on doing.")

The scribe then asked a second question: "Who is my neighbor?" he wanted to know. This was an old matter for inquiry, one that was frequently argued among the rabbis. The inference was, was his neighbor his family? Was it the Jews who kept Torah, or Jews who

did not keep Torah? It could not possibly be the hated Samaritans, could it? If the man's first question had to do with theology, the second had to do with ethics. He was uneasy. He wanted to justify himself, so he tried to get the focus off of himself. He wanted eternal life, but only at his own price. How far did he have to go? This was what he wanted to know. He was interested in eternal life, but he wanted to earn it by doing the minimum.

Again in his reply, Jesus took the offense. He told a story, and then asked a question. Again the scribe answered well, and Jesus told him to go and do likewise.

The story, I suggest, is a parabolic ballad in seven scenes.¹ The first three scenes are characterized by the verbs "come," "do," and "go." Each of these people who came upon the injured man did something and then left. The robbers were the first on the scene. There were many thieves on the Jericho-Jerusalem road. This was a 17-mile journey, but it was nothing like our beautiful 17-Mile Drive on the Monterey Peninsula. The road to Jericho was cut through a desert. It was a desolate, lifeless route, with no rest stops—17 miles of wilderness. The man who fell among thieves is not described, but a Jewish audience would naturally assume that he was a Jew. The rabbis identified the different stages of death. The "half-dead" of the text is the equivalent of the rabbinic category of "next to death." The man was unconscious. He could not identify himself. Helping themselves to everything he had, the robbers left him half-dead.

The priest was the second character to come on the scene. A member of the upper classes, almost certainly he was riding a donkey. (In the Middle East, no one of status would embark on foot on a 17-mile journey through the desert.) We have to surmise that this man could have done what the Samaritan did, but he was a prisoner of his own legal/theological system. Communication with the half-dead man was impossible, and any distinctive dress he might have been wearing was missing, having been stolen by the robbers. He might not even be a Jew. Further, if he was dead, then contact with his body would defile the priest. Thus with a quick mental check of the theological rules, the priest decided to do nothing, passing by instead on the other side of the road.

In all likelihood the Levite knew that a priest was traveling ahead of him. The old Roman road had many contours, and visibility was good. Unlike the priest, however, this Levite was not bound by regulations, so he approached the man. The Levite may have feared being robbed. He may have feared being defiled. It is likely, however, that in passing by the injured man and continuing on his journey, he followed the example of the higher-ranking priest before him.

A few days ago while I was stopped at a traffic light, I saw a man standing in the median strip holding a sign saying, "I am very hungry." I was not in a compassionate mood, but I watched as the driver in the car ahead of me gave the man some money. My heart softened, and I reached into my pocket and gave him some money also. When I looked in my mirror, I noticed the driver behind me did the same thing. We tend to imitate what we see others doing. The priest passed by the injured man, and the Levite followed suit.

But the Samaritan broke this pattern. Following the appearance of the priest and the Levite in the story, the audience listening to Jesus probably expected a Jewish layman to be the next person to come on the scene. The Jews despised the hated Samaritans. They hated them even more than unbelievers. Jesus could have told a story about a noble Jew helping a hated Samaritan. Such a story could have been more easily absorbed. Remember that the Samaritan had

“compassion.” He had a gut-level, compassionate response to the injured man. The Samaritan was not a gentile. He was bound by the same Torah that told him his neighbor was his countryman and kinsman. He was less likely than the priest and the Levite to believe that the wounded man was a neighbor, nevertheless he acted with compassion. The priest went by the man on the other side of the road; the Levite approached him before going his way; but the Samaritan stopped to help him. It is important to note also that the Samaritan was a prime target for the same robbers who might respect a priest or a Levite, but not a hated Samaritan.

By his actions the Samaritan compensated for the robber, the priest, and the Levite, in inverse order; hence the inverted parallelism of the story. The climax comes in the center, with the unexpected compassion of the Samaritan. Then the story works its way back out, with the Samaritan acting to remedy each wrong done to the injured man. The Levite could at least have rendered first aid to the man, which was the Samaritan’s first action. The priest could have taken him to safety on his donkey, which the Samaritan proceeded to do. The robbers took his money and left him half-dead; they had no intention of returning. The Samaritan paid from his own pocket, leaving the man provided for, with a promise to return and pay more if needed.

The Samaritan first cleaned and softened the man’s wounds with oil; then he disinfected them with wine; and finally bound them up. The Levite could have rendered first aid, but he did not. The imagery can be understood to have Christological implications. The language used here is very similar to the language of Hosea 6. Further, the oil and wine were not only standard first-aid remedies, they were also sacrificial elements in the temple worship. “Pour” is the language of worship. The priest and the Levite were the religious professionals. They knew the prescribed liturgy. They were the ones who poured out the oil and the wine on the high altar before God. But it was the hated Samaritan, not the priest or the Levite, who poured out the libation on the altar of this man’s wounds. He was the one who poured out the true offering that was acceptable to God.

Next, the Samaritan put the man on his donkey and led him to the inn. The priest could have used his animal to take the man to safety, but he did not. The social distinctions between riders and leaders of riding animals was crucial in Ancient Middle Eastern society (see Est 6:7-11). The Samaritan took upon himself the form of a servant and led the donkey to the inn. (The inn probably was in Jericho; there were no inns in the middle of the desert.) By allowing himself to be thus identified, the Samaritan ran the risk of the injured man’s family finding him and taking vengeance on him, feeling that he might have been partially to blame. An American cultural equivalent would be a Plains Indian in 1875 walking into Dodge City with a scalped cowboy on his horse, checking into a room over the local saloon and staying the night to take care of him. Even today in the Middle East one does not stop for an accident. If one stops and attempts to help, it will be assumed he is to blame and he will be arrested. The Samaritan knew he was putting his life at risk, yet he did not hesitate to help the helpless, half-dead man.

Finally, by his actions the Samaritan compensated for the robbers. They robbed the man; the Samaritan paid for him. The robbers left him dying; the Samaritan left him in the hands of the innkeeper to be cared for. The robbers abandoned him; the Samaritan promised to return. The wounded man had no money. First century innkeepers had an unsavory reputation. If the man could not pay the bill, he would be arrested as a debtor. Thus if the Samaritan did not pledge

to pay his final bill, the injured man would be in trouble. Further, the Samaritan had no hope of being reimbursed. A Jew dealing with a Jew could have gotten his money back, but the Samaritan expected nothing in return for his lifesaving good deeds.

Thus in inverted order the Samaritan undid everything that had been done to the man.

How can we apply this story to our lives today? Two areas readily come to mind. One is obvious; the other perhaps not so obvious.

First, this passage makes a statement about salvation. The scribe (the Bible student) was seeking to save himself, to justify himself. What was the bottom line? was his question. What did he have to do to earn salvation? Using the language of the Holy Spirit, Jesus pointed out the impossibility of this. Salvation comes as a result of an act of unexpected love. This was how salvation came to the injured man—in the form of a costly demonstration of unexpected love.

In the process, the story seems to make a statement about the Savior himself. The exegetes of the early centuries consistently identified the Good Samaritan with Jesus. The Samaritan appeared suddenly and unexpectedly, and even though he was a rejected outsider, he acted to save. The traditional leaders of the community failed, but God’s agent came to bind up the wounds of the sufferer as the unique agent of God’s costly demonstration of unexpected love.

The bottom line of the story is that this act of love might well have cost the Samaritan his life. He was a member of a hated minority. People could well have assumed that he was the one who injured the Jew. The lynching party could well have been lying in wait for him in the morning. Yet, like Jesus, he made a choice to save, no matter the cost to him. We had an example of this kind of selfless love this past week. A man killed in the high rise murders in San Francisco made the choice to save his wife at the cost of his own life. John Sculley threw himself in front of the gunman’s bullets to protect his wife.

Hence, in this parable we have a clear statement of the gospel. It isn’t teaching; it isn’t proclamation. This is a story of compassion and love. It is your story; it is my story. We were “dead in our trespasses and sins,” lying on the side of the road. Sin had robbed us of life. No one could have helped us, even if they wanted to. And, as was the case in this story, religious professionals may well have been the ones least likely to become involved. But, unexpectedly, Christ came to our aid. He did not look like a Savior, but he cleaned our wounds, pouring out his blood on the cross to cleanse us. We were anointed with the Holy Spirit. He took us to a place where we could not take ourselves. He paid for us and placed us in the Father’s care. We did nothing. He did everything.

What can we do to inherit eternal life? Jesus’ answer is, “Nothing!” He is the one who must do it—all of it. In this, the language of *paraklesis*, we see the story of salvation, the story of God’s love. This parable illustrates what Christ has done for us: it tells us how deeply our heavenly Father loves us.

The week before last I was having one of those weeks we all experience now and again—confrontations, distractions, my car getting hit while parked at the repair shop, and other unpleasant surprises. Then on Wednesday I talked to one of the young women at our singles group, sensing she was a new Christian. She told me her story. Last March she was kidnapped while she was jogging in a park. She was thrown into a van, but she jumped out even as the van was reaching 40 m.p.h. She injured her leg, and she required physical therapy. There she met a young man who shared Christ with her.

Two months ago, she became a Christian. Hearing her story was the highlight of my week. It was the story of Christ, the story of the Good Samaritan. In the midst of a tension-filled week, I was again reminded in the language of the Holy Spirit of the mercy and goodness of our God.

Secondly, this parable gives us a dynamic concept of who our neighbor is. The question, “Who is my neighbor?” is restated to become, “To whom must I become a neighbor?” The answer is, everyone who is in need—even an enemy. A neighbor is literally, a “near one,” he or she who is close, the one you encounter who is in need.

But there are many difficulties associated with loving a neighbor, aren't there? The question, “Who is my neighbor?” gives rise to other questions. For instance, are we interruptible? One impediment to being a neighbor is that we are always busy, always headed someplace, and usually late. The priest and the Levite were trying to get to their destinations and they were not going to be interrupted. The Samaritan wasn't going anywhere; he could be interrupted. In our society we tend to not be interruptible unless it is for call waiting.

Once when I was driving to Lake Tahoe in the winter I had to stop and put chains on my car wheels. I hate to put on chains. Cold hands, a feeling of ineptness, and seemingly endless traffic can dampen even the hardest spirit. An older gentleman parked his car right next to mine and asked a question about putting chains on his tires. I responded, but I didn't offer him any practical help. Later, my children asked why I hadn't helped him. I felt crushed. I had been in-between. I wasn't at home and I hadn't reached my destination. I had a plan, I couldn't be deterred, so I failed to respond to his need.

What we learn while walking with Jesus in Samaria is the capacity to see interruptions as part of God's plan for our lives. If we can't see people while we are walking on the road, then we will miss what God wants to do in us. He wants to love through us in a costly way, in the same way he loved through the sacrifice of his own Son.

And we have to ask the question, do we feel compassion? We can easily fall into the same trap as the priest and the Levite. We know all the right religious things to do, but we are trapped by our theological system. The reality of who we are in Christ becomes overshadowed by other, less important things. We can attend all the right meetings, and get our children to attend, too, but all the while we are never moved in our gut. Because of our dullness we never feel the drawing of the Holy Spirit. We are well schooled in religion, in law, in justifying ourselves, in questioning people who might be a bit off, but we are not schooled in feeling compassion and responding appropriately. Violence has become a form of escape. We see it on television; we see it in the movies. Thus, when we see the real thing, we aren't easily moved because our hearts have been hardened. Jesus wept. The good Samaritan was moved to compassion. Sometimes we, too, need a gut check.

Will it cost us to be a Good Samaritan and are we willing to pay the cost? The text makes it clear that it will be costly. Loving a near one will cost us time, money, or energy, perhaps all three. Our model is Christ. Loving us cost us him his life. Loving the man on the road to Jericho likely cost the Samaritan his life. What kinds of sacrifices are we ready to make? Are we ready to buy gas for someone stranded on the road, knowing we will not be repaid? Will we buy a meal for someone who is homeless? Will we bake something for the difficult people down the street? Will we spend the night at the hospital, loving someone who is desperately ill?

God is not interested so much in our going out and doing something. He does not ask us to solve all the problems of humanity. What he wants is for us to be the right type of people—interruptible, compassionate, willing to suffer and sacrifice when the need arises.

Tony Campolo tells a wonderful story of a time when he was in Hawaii. Hungry and unable to sleep, he decided to go out for a donut at 3 o'clock in the morning. In the local greasy spoon a number of prostitutes were sitting at a table. One woman, Agnes, was telling the others that she would be 39 years old the next day and she had never had a birthday party given for her. After the women left, Tony approached the cafe owner and asked the man if he was interested in giving Agnes a birthday party the next night. He offered to get balloons, streamers and a cake. The owner quickly agreed, but he insisted on buying the cake. Word about the party quickly spread among the people of the evening, the prostitutes, the homeless, the cast-offs of society. Next night the place was packed. Around 3:30 a.m. Agnes came in. She was speechless when she saw what was going on. When the time came to cut the cake, she asked if she could take it home to show her mother before she cut it. When she left, no one knew quite what to do. It was awkward; there was tension in the air. Not knowing what else to do, Tony suggested everyone pray. The owner looked at him and said, “I knew it!” I knew you had to be a preacher or a minister or something. What kind of church do you go to?” Tony replied, “I go to a church that gives birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning!” “No you don't,” said the owner, “because if there was a church like that, I'd be there.”

Every day we are walking in Samaria, in between, neither at home nor yet arrived at our destination. As we travel this road there will be opportunities to relive the story of the Good Samaritan and thus demonstrate the love and grace of our heavenly Father. As we have eyes to see beyond the obvious, Jesus will expand our horizons, our theological grids.

This parable of the Good Samaritan leaves us with a penetrating question. The story began with the scribe's question to Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” but it ends with, “Will you be a neighbor?” Then comes our Lord's gentle exhortation, “Go and do likewise.”

1. Thanks to Eugene Peterson and Kenneth Bailey for their insightful studies in the parables.

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