

Ordinary C -15
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The parables are an invitation, a glimpse into the reign of God. If you wish to see or know how God sees the world, come into this story, suggests Jesus. This is how the Reign of God unfolds in our lives. And when we do, we find that God's view of the world is remarkably unconventional, and the parable always knocks us off balance.

So we have here a story within a story. A lawyer, a scholar of the law, asks Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus answers with a question of his own: You know the law. What does it say? The lawyer answers correctly, "You will love the Most High God with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your soul, with all your strength; AND your neighbor as yourself." Jesus replies, "Yes, do this and you shall live."

But the lawyer is not satisfied. So with some insolence, the lawyer asks "And who is my neighbor?" Now there is no legal answer to this question, then or now, so Jesus responds with a story.

A traveler is brutally assaulted by robbers: stripped and left for dead beside the road. A priest and a Levite pass by, indeed, cross to the other side of the road to do so. Why? Is it paranoia, or narcissism or busily texting? Now the listeners gathered around Jesus would expect that the hero is about to appear, and that the hero would be someone like them, an ordinary Judean, who would stop and fix the situation.

But, here's the kicker. Jesus positions a Samaritan as the hero of the story. The Samaritan stops and bandages the wounds of the traveller. I imagine there would be gasps of horror or repugnance at the mention of the Samaritan. There was a centuries long ancestral contempt between Jewish people and Samaritan people over a cluster of issues, which at their base centered on claims as to who was a true Israelite. Some of the listeners might have walked away, unable to stomach this turn of the plot.

Jesus' story, however, is not set up as a contrast between Jew and Samaritan, but between those who pass by and the one who stops, or a contrast between those who are established and recognized and members and belongers, and those who are not. It is a close look at who is in and who is not; who is privileged and who is not. And who sees the neighbor and who does not. This story, always timeless, is more than ever a parable for our day. Mainline Christian churches will all hear the same gospel today, a day upon which the president of the most powerful nation on earth threatens to raid the homes of immigrants, detain them, and deport them.

We all plant our feet on the same soil, we walk the same earth. The earth does not belong to us, we belong to the earth. There are no undocumented ones. We reverence humanness in all its expressions. We embrace our imperfection but we look at life in terms of possibility.

Jesus does not coin the term “*Good Samaritan*.” It is simply, “a Samaritan.” Goodness is a given. Goodness was already in this humble Samaritan heart. The divine word, which impelled the Samaritan to action, is not in some book or neither off in heaven nor beyond the seas, but as close as one’s own heart.

We all have Good Samaritan stories to tell. We are moved to do and desire to do what is noble, generous, and courageous. In turn, we affirm the goodness of others when we are touched by it. We seek our place in the arc of justice, celebrate the achievements which come with passionate determination, and stand with those who raise their voices for fairness and freedom. And when our hearts are broken open to hurt, and we touch the pain of the world around us, that creates community.

We should not overlook what happens at the end of Jesus’ parable. The Samaritan is no Lone Ranger, so the Samaritan takes the wounded traveler to the inn, the place of hospitality and the haven of safety. The traveller is brought out of isolation and abandonment and into the emergence of a healing, helping community. And, by the way, isn’t that what Dignity has labored to be about for the past 50 years?

God’s heart is drawn first to those at the bottom of the human pyramid, and Jesus has his eye out for those who are there. Stories like the Parable of the Good Samaritan got Jesus into trouble.