

Neighbor Care
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
February 21, 2021

Luke 10:25-42

Last week, we looked at the story of the Transfiguration. Peter, James, and John follow Jesus up the mountain to keep him company while he's praying, but they fell asleep only to wake up and see their teacher glowing alongside two of the Greats.

As far as Jesus' public ministry goes, the story so far has been him and a crowd of disciples traveling from town to town around the region of Galilee. There have been miracles, sermons, and fantastic little arguments, but it's all just been fairly local small town stuff. But for the next big section of the book, Jesus is relentlessly focused on getting to Jerusalem. It's a turning point in the narrative, as written in Luke's Gospel.

In Jesus' day, it made no matter where you were from, everybody has to make the trek to Jerusalem to participate in temple services during the high holy days... you go in, make your sacrifices, and get on out. Unless, that is, you plan on causing trouble.

There are major cultural difference between Jerusalem and Galilee (then, and now). If you're a Hunger Games fan, think of the difference between the relatively well-off Capitol District and the impoverished farming and mining districts 11 and 12 – that's the difference between Jerusalem and Galilee.

I remember being in Jerusalem during holy week, four years ago. How the wealthy European and American Christians getting off the big tour buses had easy access to sites within the city, while at the same time, darker-skinned Christians living in the more impoverished West Bank had to wait in long lines at checkpoints to get to their sacred spaces.

Now, remember that Galilee is in the north, and Jerusalem is in the south, and in between them is the land of Samaria. You can get from Galilee to Jerusalem without going through Samaria, but it's kind of like trying to get from here to Philadelphia without going through New York City.

You could try going West on 1-84, just up a little more north to avoid the 1-95 corridor, then head over to Wilke-Barre Pennsylvania and south from there, but why would you do such a thing? It almost doubles the length of the journey. You'd have to seriously hate driving through metropolitan areas in order for that to make any sense.

But that is precisely how most Jews would travel from Galilee to Jerusalem. Instead of taking the direct route south through Samaria, they'd head east into the Decapolis, cross the Jordan River, then go south into Perea, cross back over the Jordan River area, and come out somewhere in the area of Jericho.

It was a far more expensive and time-consuming trip, but worth it if you got to avoid the Samaritans.

In the first century, Jews and the Samaritans were two similar and related ethnic groups that hated each other in the way that you can really only hate members of your own family. The Jews destroyed the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim, and the Samaritans retaliated by throwing human bones into the Jewish temple in Jerusalem right before Passover, in order to defile the space.

So, if you were a Jew trying to get from the Galilee to Jerusalem, it was worth it to avoid going through Samaria. Jewish people couldn't expect hospitality in Samaria, and they didn't want it from those jerks anyhow.

For what it's worth, though, Jesus takes the direct path and cuts straight on through. He sends people out ahead of him to secure lodging and find places to speak to the crowds. Sometimes he scores big points, and sometimes they kick him out. As he's teaching one day, an expert in the law stood up to test him. "*Teacher,*" he asked, "*what must I do to inherit eternal life?*"

Get that picture in your mind. Here's a country hick from Nazareth, trailed by a bunch of fishermen, tax collectors and zealots, hanging out in the God-forsaken land of Samaria, and he's being challenged by a law professor.

Jesus gave a safe answer, not that different from what any other rabbi would say. So the lawyer presses for more: asking him, "*And who is my neighbor?*" Jesus responds with a story.

The set-up and structure are as familiar now as they were back then. Create a relatable problem: the stretch of road between Jerusalem and Jericho was famous for its violence, so it's not a stretch to imagine a guy who was robbed and left for dead.

In classic storytelling form, three people interact with the problem. Two get it dreadfully wrong, and the third gets it right.

Now normally, if you had a priest and a Levite, the third character would be a scribe, a teacher of the law, just like the man who raised this question with Jesus.

Imagine the law professor waiting, listening. He's told that the priest doesn't help, and the Levite doesn't help, and this teacher is feeling pretty excited about what should come next - that's awful nice of Jesus, you know, to tell a story in which someone just like him is the hero.

But then, of course, Jesus turns it upside down. The hero of the story is one of the worst of the worst: a Samaritan. Jesus asks him who acted as a neighbor to the man who had been robbed, and the professor can't even bring himself to say 'Samaritan' out loud, saying instead "*The one who had mercy on him.*"

Jesus told him, "*Go and do likewise.*" We have no idea what the professor did with that advice.

Note that Jesus didn't ask the professor which one of the characters was a good person, or which was properly following the law. It's entirely possible that the Levite was rushing to be a good neighbor to someone in the next town, or that the priest was busy on his way to a funeral service. We don't know!

Jesus makes it all about what this one guy on the side of the road needs, right now. I think it's a lot easier to talk about mercy in an abstract sense. But when the professor pushed Jesus to define the limit who counts as a neighbor, Jesus holds up a strange example.

It seems simple enough. Not easy, but simple. Just help the person in front of you who needs it.

But then, right after that, we get this story about Martha and Mary. And I do think, after holding them in tension this week, that they belong together. There's a crowd at their house, and Martha is busy making preparations.

The word that is used here in Greek is DIACOKEN, so let's be clear this is about more than chopping vegetables, it's about serving the church in her home as a deacon would. There's a lot to be done when you suddenly have church folk over, right?

Sister Mary's no help at all, just sitting there at Jesus' feet, learning along with all the others. Martha needs her sister's help, but Jesus tells her to chill. And it seems so harsh. It's all well and good to sit around talking about faith and love, but what happened to the Samaritan's willingness to offer hospitality in the moment? That's literally what Martha is trying to do here!

What's better, sitting at Jesus' feet, when there's no dinner on the table and no clean linens on the beds, or getting the work done that needs to be done? This isn't a rhetorical question, friends.

But let me take you back to last week, to the story of the Transfiguration. *While [Peter] was speaking, a cloud appeared and covered them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. A voice came from the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him."*¹

I think that's the connection. The professor knew the right answers, but he wasn't really listening. So Jesus told a wild story with a Samaritan as a hero to get him to listen up, to see that the kingdom of God might be far different from what he was expecting.

Martha wasn't wrong to be making preparations! Offering hospitality is a good thing! The problem wasn't that she was baking bread or sweeping the floor or haggling at the market for the good wine. The problem was that Jesus was trying to teach, but in all of her busyness, she wasn't able to hear what he had to say.

Jesus didn't ask us to pick between a life of action and service or a life of prayer and contemplation - we are called to do both. Maybe one sign that can help us figure out when to act and when to wait is a sign that we see Martha exhibiting. She is worrying and distracted. Overwhelmed.

Jesus seems to suggest that her worry and lack of focus is what is keeping her from doing the best thing at that moment.

Maybe when we see too many jobs to tackle, this can be our sign to stop and listen for the good word that Christ is bringing to us right now.

We won't be just sitting and listening forever, because we are constantly being called into action.

Sometimes, though, the listening needs to come first. But at other times, being present with someone in desperate need is what needs to come first.

We don't have to pit the Martha's and Mary's against one another. We need both, we need to BE both.

May we work together with God to figure out which sister, and which neighbor we need to be right now. Amen.

¹ Luke 9:34-35