

The Good Neighbor
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A reading from Luke, chapter 10:

Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, 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, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’” (Luke 10:30-35)

In a number of ways, the inn corresponds to the Christian church. We in the church may be caught unaware as to how to provide care—even how to get people inside our doors—but Christ brings people to us. He makes His church a place for the healthy and the broken until He comes again.

What does the innkeeper do in the parable? He receives and then shares. Likewise the church first receives from Christ—the two denarii in the parable remind me of our spiritual gifts of forgiveness and new life and our physical gifts of food, clothing, etc.—and then we are blessed to share God’s gifts. Often in totally unexpected opportunities that God Himself provides.

Yet even clergy, at times, ignore what happens to people along the roadside. When most people hear this parable, the first thing they may ask themselves may be “*Is my good Samaritan coming? Am I bleeding out on the roadside? Will anyone bother to help me? And even if they try, will they know how to help?*” I think we can all be frank. Awful can things happen that stop us dead in our tracks. Then, when others come along and react, our situation—almost incredibly—gets worse. Upright “model Christians” look and turn away. We, as regular church-goers, may marvel when those who are alone and broken do not crawl into church onto their own, when, frankly, in their fallen and wounded state they are unable to do so.

God’s Word, absolution, and the Lord’s Supper are so central to our life and health as Christians that, once apart from it, we can become too weak to take hold of the gifts that are ours. And this is yet another reason why Christians are to bear each other’s burdens (Galatians 6:2): to keep Christ’s life-giving gifts in full circulation through the *entire* body of believers.

God has given us to one another—in this congregation, this town, and this world—for a reason. “Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord GOD, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?” (Ezekiel 18:23). No, instead God has made us *neighbors*, whether we know one another or not and certainly whether we have prepared ourselves for it or not.

When we get people through the doors of the church, we can come together as people with something in common. We are all people in need, and the church is one place where we receive God's care in obvious ways. Here we remember to bear one another's burdens. Not by *knowing* every burden or dissecting every problem—not by "*fixing*" things—but by receiving God's gifts and looking for the forgiveness, rest, and healing that come only from the Lord.

The man in this parable was so broken that the Good Samaritan had to deal with his wounds first along the roadside. And even after that, he had to be carried on a donkey because he was too weak to walk on his own. Which is to say, when we interact with people "along the roadside" instead of at church, the Lord understands. We can only do what we can with the opportunities given to us.

In no uncertain terms, Jesus is the heart of the parable message. He overshadows our missed opportunities, our poor performances, and as Savior of the world He even overshadows the worst of abuses and tragedies.

Jesus is the ultimate Rescuer, in part because He is also the ultimate victim. When He came into this world, He was mobbed and left to die on the side of a road. He was robbed of His reputation and then of His life, stripped naked and left with no friend to help Him or limit the shame. No one stopped the injustice. Men, women, and children passed Him by: businessmen, tourists, *everyone*, with the hypocritical clergy instigating and exacerbating the situation. Jesus was betrayed, broken, abandoned, and left to die alone, without rescuer.

And, yet, as the Son of God and in the power of the Word, Jesus is the greatest "good Samaritan." He takes our problems upon Himself. He lifts us up, not onto a donkey, but onto His own body. He finds a place for us. He pays what we owe. He promises to come again and permanently guarantee our safety, health, and well-being. He is preparing a permanent place for us.

But here is one more revelation this passage of Scripture gives us about Jesus. The parable of the Good Samaritan is the answer to a series of questions:

And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" And 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 he said to him, "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live." But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:25-29)

What do we do to inherit eternal life? How do we read the Law? Does justifying ourselves get us into heaven? Can we brag before God about loving our neighbors as ourselves?

Jesus uses the parable to alter the questions before answering them. What do *we* do, becomes what has *Christ* done. How *we* read the Law, becomes a remembrance of God's mercy and all He does for us, despite the very real sin and tragedy in this life. *Can we justify ourselves?* No,

but Christ can set us right. *Can we brag before God about our love?* No, but we can receive His love and care as He comes to us—clothed in humility—and share it.

The final question, “Who is your neighbor?” remains. It gets a lengthy answer. Everyone is our neighbor, even those we fear or disdain. Strangers, clergy, hypocrites are neighbors alike. But we are drawn into the parable, too. We are neighbors to others, but most importantly *Jesus* is our neighbor!

Jesus is beside you, in the same world and neighborhood that you are. He is aware of your humanity. He sees how others impact you. He knows your needs, and He knows how to respond to you just as you are. He forgives you and gives you Himself as the Living Word. And, thanks be to God, His overwhelmingly good neighborliness impacts how we can speak and act as neighbors to others!

It is as neighbors that we get to share His Word and His gifts beyond our families. So that we get to help whomever we find along the roadside. We get to take what our Lord has given us and share it as we can. We get to accompany each other to the inn, and once here we get to receive the care our Lord provides for us until His final return.