

Who Is My Neighbor?

In the faith-based movie *War Room*, protagonist Tony Jordan is accused of embezzling company funds and is fired from his job. One of his two supervisors is especially furious with Tony's behavior, and would have easily pressed criminal charges except for a more caring business partner who doesn't want to go that far. Instead, he accepts Tony's sincere apology and promise of restitution.

One day, though, the Jordans see a stranded motorist on a busy street. It turns out to be the former irate supervisor. Casually, Tony goes over to the car, opens the trunk, and takes out the tire iron. The man is certain he'll be beaten up, but is surprised to see Tony kneel down on the ground and remove the flat tire, changing it and replacing the tool in the trunk. Then Tony goes over and shakes the man's hand! As the Jordans drive away, all we see is the man standing stunned beside his car, trying to figure out what happened.

It's a modern re-telling based on the theme of Jesus' most famous parable, the Good Samaritan, where a most unlikely person becomes the hero by doing the opposite of what would be expected. Similar adaptations have been made in stories of members of ethnic or racial groups helping out those who despise them. As in Jesus' day, the story forces us to expand our definition of neighbor to include anyone near us in need, regardless of background or tradition.

The expert in religious law who asked Jesus the question, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life" wasn't doing it to gain understanding, but to gain advantage over Jesus. So Jesus turned the question around by replying, "You're the expert! You've spent your life studying the law! You tell me!" Jesus' answer steered the debate toward the scriptures, not to human interpretations of the law that the rabbis often favored. The religious lawyer answered correctly by combining Deuteronomy 6:5 ("Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your

soul, all your strength, and all your mind.”) with Leviticus 19:18 (“Love your neighbor as yourself.”) Jesus could have responded by saying that salvation isn’t a matter of ‘doing’, but of God’s grace. Rather, he said, “Do this and you will live!” (v.28), making our actions important as they reflect our attitude towards God, neighbor and self. It also suggests that the lawyer wasn’t doing what he knew he should, convicting him for failing to match his actions with his words.

“And who is my neighbor?” On the surface, it appears as if the lawyer is asking who he must love. However, at a deeper level, he’s asking Jesus to define the boundaries so that he’ll know who he *isn’t* required to love, who *isn’t* his neighbor. It exposes the prejudice of the Jewish people in Jesus’ day, their tendency to judge who’s worthy of God’s love and who’s not. The parable that follows encourages us to shift our focus from the fence to the neighbor on the other side. When our eyes are focused on the fence, we can’t see our neighbor clearly. And first century Jews had certainly built some high fences, particularly with the Samaritans who were hated even more than the Romans. They were Israelites who had intermarried with the Assyrians after the captivity that ended the Northern Kingdom, creating their own unique form of Judaism and worshiping on Mount Gerizim, not in Jerusalem. Yet a person from this despised group was made the hero of Jesus’ story – what a shock to the listeners who first heard it!

“A Jewish man was traveling from Jerusalem down to Jericho” (v.30a) This was a dangerous trip that was not only physically demanding (a 3,000 foot drop in elevation in only 17 miles), but could easily lead to ambush as the rocky terrain made it perfect for thieves to hide out and escape after a robbery. And that’s what happened, “he was attacked by bandits. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him up, and left him half dead beside the road.” (v.30b)

“By chance a priest came along. But when he saw the man lying there, he crossed to the other side of the road and passed him by. A Levite walked over and looked at him lying there,

but he also passed by on the other side.” (v.31-32) Priest were descendants of Aaron, the chief ministers of the sacrifices and rituals of the temple; the Levites were their assistants. The Jews expected exemplary behavior from them – caring and compassionate – as they were God’s servants. Yet, they ignored an obvious need. Why?

- perhaps they were returning home after conducting their duties at the temple;
- perhaps they are disgusted by the bloody victim and preferred not to dirty their hands;
- perhaps the victim was dead. A Jew touching a dead human body would be rendered unclean for seven days, cut off from the assembly of the people (Numbers 19:11, 13, 20);
- perhaps the man has been placed there to lure them into an ambush;
- perhaps they were overwhelmed at the prospect of transporting an injured man through the mountains and finding assistance for him in the next town.

Whatever their reasons, Jesus’ story highlights that observing the letter of the law falls short of loving God and neighbor.

We shouldn’t be too quick to trash the priest and the Levite, as we’ve acted like they did on probably more than one occasion: we, too, may have had urgent business that wouldn’t permit delay; we may have not wanted to get dirty; we may have been afraid of stopping on a deserted road to help a stranger; we may have found ourselves overwhelmed with the logistics of helping needy people. These are very real concerns, and we need to acknowledge them as such.

“Then a Samaritan came along, and when he saw the man, he felt compassion for him. Going over to him, the Samaritan soothed his wounds with olive oil and wine and bandaged them. Then he put the man on his own donkey and took him to an inn where he took care of him. The next day he handed the innkeeper two silver coins, telling him, ‘Take care of this man. If his bill runs higher than this, I’ll pay you the next time I’m here.’” (v.33-35) By this act, the

Samaritan reversed the actions of the thieves. They robbed the man, left him to die, and abandoned him. The Samaritan paid for the man, left him in good hands, and promised to return. Why? Because “he felt compassion” (Greek: *esplanchnisthe*—“moved to the depths of the bowels”). This is more than sympathy. This is empathy – feeling the pain of another – with actions to match:

- the Samaritan didn’t glance at the victim then turn his eyes elsewhere. He didn’t dismiss the man, “This guy’s a Jew, one of our enemies.” Nor did he judge him, “What a fool! This man was mugged because he dared to travel this dangerous road alone. Serves him right!” No, the Samaritan recognized the wounded traveler as a fellow human being in need, someone like himself, and sought to treat him as he would himself.
- the Samaritan felt “in his gut” the pain of the broken traveler, recognizing a bond between himself and this stranger. Not unlike God who isn’t unmoved by human pain and sorrow, but suffers along with his people. The sorrow felt by the people becomes the sorrow felt by God.
- the Samaritan does what he can to help. First, he anoints the wounds with oil and wine, both used in temple rituals that the priest and Levite chose not to extend to the suffering victim. Then he places the man on his mount, probably a donkey, walking alongside instead. The priest and Levite would also have had mounts, but chose to continued riding on their way. Finally, a significant sum was spent on taking care of the man, something the priest and Levite avoided. In other words, the Samaritan recognized quickly what must be done. He didn’t hesitate to put his resources to use. He was the right person in the right place at the right time.

Frank and Mary were an odd couple who started attending a small rural church. They drove an old car and dressed in work clothes even at Sunday worship. They owned a janitorial

business that they ran from their home, and asked if the church needed a custodian. They were told, “No, we don’t. We have no money to spend on services like that.” However, this didn’t stop them from getting involved.

In the fall of that year, the missions committee decided to sponsor a refugee, and put out the appeal for a family who could take the person in. There were no responses except questions, “What would it entail?” “Do we know anything about this refugee?” “Has anyone done a criminal background check?” “What about the liabilities? We don’t want to get sued.” Although the congregation had sympathy for the plight of the refugee, no one wanted to take it to the next level. No one except Frank and Mary. They met privately with the minister and expressed their desire to have the person in their home until things could get worked out. How interesting that this couple, who like the Samaritan were most unlikely to be the heroes, came forward.

Jesus calls us to fulfill the role of the Good Samaritan and help anyone who’s in need, regardless of social barriers. Lack of time, money, inconvenience or fear of being sued are all excuses for non-involvement toward people in need. Jesus invites us to have hearts of love for anybody who’s hurting. The way the beaten man is treated shows three of life’s philosophies: “What’s yours is mine” (the robbers), “What’s mine is mine” (the priest and Levite), “What’s mine is yours” (the Samaritan). Jesus wants us to choose the way of the Samaritan. Mother Teresa put it this way, “The biggest disease today is not leprosy, or cancer. It’s the feeling of being uncared for or unwanted, of being deserted and alone, being indifferent toward one’s neighbour who may be the victim of poverty or disease or exploited and at the end of his life, left at a roadside.” God loves us whole. He makes us whole and enables us to love others whole. It doesn’t matter where love comes from-only that love is done. That’s our mission. Amen.