

PEOPLE AS PEOPLE
Sermon for Pentecost 8C-Lk 10:25-37
LPC, 7/10/16

A weekly feature of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* is Good Samaritan stories. These are submitted by private citizens and appear on page 2. It's nice to see them there and be reminded that there is still considerable good in the world. Typically the writer has had an automobile accident or some kind of health crisis in a public place, and strangers have gone above and beyond to be helpful.

Have you had any Good Samaritan experiences? I have had several. I once did a "one-eighty" in my car on a rain-slicked road, flattening a tire. Two men in a pick-up, whom I might have dismissively called "red-necks" in other circumstances, knelt in the mud to change my tire for me.

When you say "Good Samaritan" everyone knows what you are talking about. And of course, we owe that language from today's story from the Gospel of Luke. At first glance the message of this story seems to be about identifying with the Samaritan and likewise *being* a good Samaritan. Certainly Jesus teaches us to love our neighbors as ourselves, and indicates through this story that our neighbors are everywhere, and may not be like us in every way.

And if I stand here and preach to you and tell you to "be a Good Samaritan," you will know what I mean. You will understand that I am preaching that you should show mercy to strangers, the way the Samaritan in the story showed mercy to the mugging victim.

But what if, instead of saying, "be a Good Samaritan," I were to tell you, "be a good Muslim," or "be a good immigrant," or "be a good atheist," or "be a good communist"? You would probably be confused, and you might even be offended.

My point has to do with the way Jesus' story would have been heard by the original audience. We are told that in the context of this excerpt Jesus is responding to a question from a lawyer. The questioner is an expert in Jewish law. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, and his audience presumably was Jewish. And as we all know, Jews and Samaritans hated each other.

Jews and Samaritans were ethnically, culturally and religiously related, but there's no feud like a family feud. Jews regarded Samaritans as apostates, as persons who had disregarded and corrupted the sacred law, thereby dissing God Godself, an unforgivable sin. And here, a member of this despised group is being held up as an example to the pious and "right-thinking people." You have to understand how utterly scandalous this is.

In order to bring this home, try to call to mind a class of persons you tend to generalize negatively. Now, be honest. Surely there's been a time when you've observed or heard about someone of a certain description doing something of which you disapprove, and you've thought, "Well, that's typical." It doesn't have to be a person of a different religion or nationality or political party or sexual orientation, although those are the classics. It could be fat people, or, or people who wear their pants so their underwear shows, or people who talk too loud, or addicts, or adulterers.

Now think of one of these people as being presented to you as a role model. This is a bit of what Jesus is doing here. No wonder Jesus made people mad!

But that's not all, and that's not even the main thing Jesus is doing here. Jesus' point is not about rubbing our noses in our own prejudices, but about being a neighbor. The lawyer has asked "Who is my neighbor?" expecting a checklist against which to justify himself, and Jesus responds, not with a checklist (because love never keeps checklists!) but with an example of what it is to look at people as people rather than as categories.

In many ways the story of the Good Samaritan becomes more powerful when we put ourselves not in the place of the Good Samaritan, but in the place of the crime victim. The people with whom the victim might have been expected to identify most closely ignore him, but the person whom the victim might have discounted under other circumstances is his true countryman, because this person has recognized the humanity that binds the men together despite their differences.

I'd like to share with you a Good Samaritan parable for our own day, when racial tensions are high following the shooting deaths of two black men by police in separate incidents, and then the murder of five police officers by a black man in Dallas. I got this story from the internet, so there's no way of knowing whether it is actually true. But we're talking parables here, where a truth is expressed by a story whose events may or may not have actually happened.

The story is told from the point of view an African American woman who entered a convenience store to see two white police officers talking to the white proprietor. As she went down an aisle she became aware that the older officer had followed her partway down the aisle.

Now if you have black friends you know this happens a lot to black people, who are tailed in stores more often than others, presumably under suspicion of shoplifting. It rankles, as I'm sure you can understand. But there's not a whole lot that can be done in such a situation without making things worse, so most people keep quiet when it happens.

After the woman made her selection she turned around and walked back toward the checkout, but had to pass the policeman. He said to her, "How are you?" She said, "Fine," and made to pass, but he said, "No, how are you really?" She said, "I'm tired." He said, "I'm tired too. I guess it's hard to be both of us right now." She began to weep, and he held her. Just two people treating each other like people despite being of different "categories."

Taking to heart the point of the Good Samaritan story is like looking at everyone, even the type we despise, as people. That person from another group might possibly be the one to be kind to us, or even possibly save our lives one day, for no other reason than that we are both people.

Thank God for the Good Samaritans. For the good Muslims. For the good African Americans and for the good white cops. For the good rednecks. For all the people who regard each other as fellow people. Pray that we may go and do likewise.