

Grace and peace to you from God the Father, and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The story of the Good Samaritan is one of the most well-known stories of Jesus. Many countries even have Good Samaritan laws, so-named to provide legal protections for those who act as “good Samaritans” to help others. The good Samaritan has become a paragon for going beyond typical expectations to care for others. So, we might think we know all there is to know about this parable that Jesus tells. Yet by taking another look, I hope that we can see not only a powerful example for Christians to follow but a renewed glimpse of the wide scope of God's restoration of God's people.

When Jesus is tested by the lawyer (and remember that the lawyer was an expert of the Torah—God's laws) he asked about the actions consistent with inheriting eternal life. Jesus responds by returning the question, asking “What is written in the Law?” and inquiring about this expert's interpretation of the Torah on this specific point. When the man answers using the central Scriptural commands to love God and love neighbor (Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18, respectively), Jesus affirms that his interpretation is correct and confirms that living in line with these covenantal expectations will result in eternal life.

Here's where Luke's story takes an interesting turn. The Torah expert desires to “justify himself” and so asks the now-infamous question, “And who is my neighbor?” . Luke's characterization suggests that this Torah scholar is hoping to limit the category of “neighbor” in some way. Doing so would certainly make adherence to the command easier, since the smaller the circle of one's “neighbors,” presumably the easier it is to act in love toward them.

Jesus' answer to this question comes in a parable about a Samaritan who rescues a Jewish man who had been attacked, robbed, and left for dead. The contrast to this Samaritan is provided by a priest and Levite, who both see the desperate man but “passed by on the other side”. At this point, Luke's audience, as well as Jesus' listeners, would have begun to feel the surprise of the story. The priest and Levite are the anticipated “good guys” of the story, while a Samaritan would hardly be expected to stop and help a Jewish person in trouble given past conflicts between their peoples.

Jesus details the Samaritan's acts of compassion for the man in trouble: attending to his wounds, bringing him to an inn, and paying for his care. **These tangible actions** are the authentic signs of what neighbors do. Jesus' final question turns on its head his interrogator's earlier question, “who is my neighbor?”. Jesus instead asks which of the three characters in the story fulfilled the **role of “neighbor”** . By being so concerned about who qualified as his neighbor, this Torah expert neglected to consider whether he himself was acting like a “neighbor.” We hear this discipleship value in Jesus' final words, “Go and do

likewise” (in other words, show mercy. Those who follow Jesus are to take on the role of neighbor to others, especially those in need and in desperate circumstances. This is certainly a Lukan theme, as he highlights the importance of compassionate care for the marginalized. And this ethical expectation fits with Jesus’ own ministry of compassion.

Yet Luke does not narrate this episode for ethical purposes alone. In the first century Jews and Samaritans did not get along, even though they worshipped the same God. Yet Luke makes the Samaritan the good guy in this story over the two most respected members of the Jews—a priest and a Levite. The Samaritans are part of the people of God, and their inclusion in Luke’s story of Jesus indicates that God’s restoration of Israel has begun in earnest.

Jesus’ parable portrays a Samaritan as an exemplary neighbor to another member of Israel and intimates that Samaritans are a part of wider Israel. The parable demonstrates that God is enacting, in Jesus the Messiah, the restoration of the fullness of Israel, as a prelude to the offering of salvation to all nations. A surprising twist of the parable is that “the Samaritan who enacted mercy is not only an Israelite but functions in the parable as an *ideal Israelite*”. That was a hard lesson for the lawyer as we see he could not bring himself to say the Samaritan was the good neighbor, but instead chose to say, “The one who showed him mercy.”

So, who do you relate with in this story? I think most of us would like to think of ourselves as the good Samaritan. Who wouldn’t? But did you ever see yourself as the traveler who got beaten up? When the lawyer asked the question “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?” he thought he already knew the answer.

But now look at this story from the perspective of the man needing help. We are all looking for the good life, the meaningful life, the satisfying life which God intended for us to have the life that is in a right relationship with God and all of creation. Yet life is not always easy. “How can we get out of the ditches of brokenness, separation, hatred, and self-righteous. How can we pull ourselves up out of the ditch? We can’t, but Jesus can. We were rescued in the waters of our baptism. Jesus has pulled us out of the ditch. And we are to help others by telling them the good news so Jesus can pull them out the ditch too.

It isn’t what we can do for ourselves, but what Christ can do for us. And after Christ has pulled us from the ditch and we are thankful for his love, we are to love our neighbors as Christ loves us. As we think about this parable we get a picture of what Christianity is supposed to look like.

Jesus tells the lawyer to go and show mercy to others. Jesus asks us to help those who are feeling the brokenness of this world, those who have been mugged, robbed, beaten, battered by the forces of this world, and down on their luck. We are to be like the good Samaritan helping others, showing that mercy still happens in this world.

And St. John's provides opportunities—supporting Girls on the Run, the Angel Tree at Christmas, collecting food for Redbud Area Ministries, and items for our migrant workers through Faith in Action. I think we still have a need for some Sunday School teachers for this fall, and lots of opportunities to serve on Sunday mornings. And that's just the tip of the iceberg. There are so many ways to help others in the community—through AARP activities, school projects, nursing homes and hospitals, Habitat for Humanity, Special Olympics, and many other non-project organizations would love to have more volunteers.

There are so many ways to help others. We just need to pay attention. Often the opportunities are right there in front of us.

From the book, "Rabbinic Stories for Christian Ministers" by author William Silverman comes the following story. A rabbi and a soap maker went for a walk together. The soap maker had some negative things to say about religion: "What good is religion? Just look around you, what do you see: Trouble, misery, wars, even after all these years and years of preaching and teaching about goodness, truth, and peace. What good is religion with all its prayers and sermons if all this evil still exists?"

The rabbi kept quiet as they continued their walk. Then they noticed a child playing in the gutter. The child was just filthy with dirt and mud. The rabbi said to the soap maker: "Look at this child! Now you say that soap makes people clean, but what good is it? With all the soap in the world, this child is still dirty. What good is soap after all?" The soap maker immediately answered him: "But rabbi, soap can't do its job if it isn't used." That's exactly right," said the rabbi. And so it is with religion. It will not accomplish anything unless people use it!"

Our world is in great need. There are many people in the ditch beside the road. Show mercy... Go pull one out this week....AMEN.