

The self-centered lawyer meets Jesus * Luke 10:25-37
February 28, 2021 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

I'm sure that when we look back at this past year, we will all remember 2020 as the year of COVID-19. This coronavirus just kind of swallowed up the whole year, didn't it?

But for many, 2020 will be memorable for another reason – 2020 will be remembered as the year when concern over racial inequalities in our society took hold of our cultural consciousness.

The week after George Floyd died, Aaron Ritter, a pastor in Colorado (Summitview Church) wrote:

"When we all watched George Floyd's body go limp last week, something snapped. It seemed to be one of those rare moments when the collective conscience of an entire nation was lit on fire. That conscience had begun to flare up a time or two in recent years, but this past week it was set fully ablaze. Perhaps it was because the coronavirus has changed us and heightened our sensitivities. Perhaps we were primed in the preceding weeks by Ahmaud Arbery and Amy Cooper. Regardless, nearly everyone I know felt something deeply. Sadness. Rage. Determination."ⁱ

That was a blog post that he wrote to help his church to think about racial inequality and that's an important thing for OUR church to think about too. What role do we as Christians play in the larger conversation about race in our society? Do we keep quiet and mind our own business? Do we run off and sign up with Black Lives Matter without a second thought? Do we keep our mind on spiritual things or engage with earthly things like race and privilege?

Those are all good and important questions but before we get to them, I think that we need to ask an even more fundamental question – is it appropriate for us as Christians to put limits on who we are willing to love? Can we say "there's 'us' and there's 'them' and we'll love the people who look like us"? Or is God calling us to something much more all-encompassing?

Well, to answer that, we are going to go to a passage that I'm sure many of you know well – and that's the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10. The Good Samaritan has taken on a life of its own in our culture – we all know what a 'good Samaritan' is – we're going to dig a little more deeply into that today and think about why Jesus told the story in the first place. And you'll find that at Luke 10, verse 25. Luke 10:25.

25 On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

So let's set the scene – you've got Jesus, sitting in the middle of a crowd, teaching them about the things of God, and then this law expert stands up to test Jesus. Everyone there knows he's a brilliant man – he's spent years studying the Jewish Law; and everyone knows that he's a pious man - he's probably well-known for observing even the most miniscule detail of the Law. He is essentially 'distinguished professor of theology at the Anytown Seminary, and here he is, ready to grill Jesus and so he asks - "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus, recognizing by the man's clothing that he's probably an expert in the Law, replies -

26 "What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"

27 He answered: " '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, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' "

He's pulling together two of the most important laws of the OT – Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 – that's a pretty good summary of OT Law. And Jesus thinks so, too. He says:

28 "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live." Jesus is reminding us all that knowing something is not enough, you actually have to DO it.

29 But he wanted to justify himself [he wanted to PROVE that he was already doing this (thank you very much) and so he decides to clarify things a little], so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

Now, to be completely honest, I'm not entirely sure what the expert was trying to do here. Verse 25 says that he was trying to 'test' Jesus – does that mean that the expert was trying to 'test Jesus' – like, grill Him for His theological accuracy, or 'test Him' – like, catch Him in a trap? I'm not entirely sure, but this follow up question sure makes me think that it's the latter, because Jesus should really say here 'love those who love God.' Leviticus 19:18 – the 'love your neighbour' verse implies that 'your neighbour' is 'one of your own people.'ⁱⁱ That would be the 'right answer' from the expert's point of view and anything else that Jesus might say could serve to discredit Him in the eyes of the listeners.

But Jesus has a neat way of side-stepping traps -

30 In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. [Apparently this stretch of highway was well-known for having caves and hideouts where thieves and robbers could lie in wait and attack people as they passed by. Certainly that's what happened here and so now you have this poor man beaten and naked and robbed of all his possessions.]

31 A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. [The priest is going 'down' the same road which means that he's going down the hill from Jerusalem to Jericho – that's a drop of about a kilometer from top to bottom – and so that means he's probably heading home from work and he's tired – but still – this is a priest – a godly man. He would have known 'Love your neighbour as yourself' but instead of stopping by to help him, he pulled his robes a little tighter and hurried on by.

32 So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. [A Levite is a lesser priest – kind of a caretaker of the Temple – but still, he knows 'Love your neighbour as yourself' – but he too, like the priest, just heads on by.

Now at this point, the expert in the Law is thinking – 'ha, ha, very funny – the religious elite don't help the guy but then the Jewish everyman comes along and helps him out and he's the hero' – it's just like every other joke where the priest and the rabbi go into a bar and it's the bar keeper who's the hero and we all laugh at the priests – but then Jesus goes completely off-script and says something entirely unexpected. Verse 33 -

33 But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him.

Now we know from the Exile series in the Fall what Israelites thought of the Samaritans. The Samaritans were considered 'halfbreeds' – the product of the dregs of Jewish society that got left when the elite went into Exile and the transplants that the Assyrian government moved into that region to dilute the 'pure Jewish blood.' They're 'the other' par excellence. We're at Luke 10; go back to Luke 9:55 and the disciples are ready to call down fire on an entire Samaritan village. It's shocking to think that the Samaritan would help.

It's like the Samaritan is the Muslim guy with a turban and a big bushy beard. He's the aboriginal man who's made no effort to assimilate to Western culture. He's the big black guy with his hoodie pulled low. And he's the one that helps. Just look at the pile of action words here –

'He saw the man, he took pity on him. 34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him.

35 The next day he took out two silver coins (that's about three weeks' worth of food for one person)ⁱⁱⁱ and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'

36 "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

Well, now it's the expert in the Law who's been trapped. He can't say 'the Jewish people' because everybody listening knows that none of them helped. But he won't say 'the Samaritan,' because he's not willing to believe that 'that kind of person' is capable of love. And so he says -

37 The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise" (Luk 10:25-37 NIV).

That's the point of the parable – we can't go around drawing lines and making judgments about who deserves love. Jesus says to the expert – 'Go and love like the Samaritan. Sacrificially. Unconditionally. Put yourself in harm's way, if you have to.' Right? By stopping to help the man, he was putting himself in danger of becoming just like the man, and yet Jesus says – you, go, do likewise. Love others unconditionally. That, I think is the point of the parable.

But let's not forget that the parable is actually part of a larger conversation. Jesus wasn't just sitting around teaching His disciples and out of the blue told this story about a Samaritan. No, He tells the story in response to an Israelite person who wants to disqualify people from love on the basis of their race. And so I think that this really turns the parable into an indictment of any religious person who claims to love God and yet draws distinct boundaries around who he's willing to love.

Think about it. You've got three people in this passage who are 'love God with all of your heart and soul and mind and strength people' – the expert in the Law, the priest and the Levite – and none of them are

willing to love their neighbour. They put their own interests first and say 'I'm not willing to love that person, just because he's different from me.'

But then along comes 'the other' – the Samaritan – and he's the one that shows what God's love is actually like – selfless, sacrificial, unconditional love. And Jesus says to the expert; Jesus says to us 'Go and do likewise.'

Frankly, I think that the point of this whole passage is to say that 'if you're going to love God, then you need to love others. Loving God means loving others unconditionally.'

Right? This whole thing started out with a conversation about 'what you gotta do to get eternal life' and the lawyer said 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and strength and soul' and love your neighbour as yourself, but then his further questioning revealed that he wasn't really willing to love his neighbour. And so Jesus took the opportunity to say – then you're not really loving God. Loving God means loving others unconditionally.

And notice, I'm choosing that word 'others' intentionally. The expert wants to say 'oh, I'll love my neighbour – but I'll carefully define who my neighbour is – someone that looks like me, someone who deserves my compassion' but Jesus says 'No, you can't place boundaries around neighbours – anyone in need is a neighbour' – you gotta love others unconditionally. Not according to their race, not according to their class, not according to their gender. Loving God means loving others unconditionally. (Now that doesn't mean that we turn a blind eye to any sin issues; that's a conversation that needs to come later) but when people are in need, we need to give them the benefit of the doubt and love them unconditionally. Loving God means loving others unconditionally.

Now why? Why would you do that? Why would you stick your neck out for someone who's different from you?

Because that's what Jesus did for us. From God's point of view, we were all the needy man lying on the road, overcome and left for dead by sin. But Jesus came along and put Himself in harm's way; He loved us to the point of giving His life for us – and that was before we even agreed to live for Him. We love because He first loved us. He freely poured His love out on us, to give us new life and eternal life, and so now, if we're going to love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength, in response to what God has already done for us, then we need to do likewise for others and love them unconditionally.

Loving God means loving other unconditionally.

And I think that that has implications for us as a church as we engage in the conversation about race that happening in our larger society. I'm not sure that we should rush headlong into Black Lives Matter; as an organization, there are some red flags, but as a concept, I'm totally on board. I have black friends who have been pulled over, accused of stealing things – teaching their kids to always have receipts so that they're not falsely accused – and these are good, godly church-going people! That's just a kind of discrimination that I've never faced. And so I need to be part of the solution, not part of the problem.

Especially as a Christian. I need to be very intentional about seeing people the way God sees them, not the way our culture's stereotypes and preconceptions see them. I want to use whatever freedom and privilege my white skin gains me to benefit others who look different. Again, there are nuances in how we work these things out in the details, but as believers, our primary posture, our benefit of the doubt,

first blush reaction to ‘the other’ should be to love them the way that God loved us – and that’s unconditionally. Loving God means loving others unconditionally.

Let me close with this. There’s an old saying – good fences make good neighbours^{iv} – the idea being that we build walls and say – you stay on your side and I’ll stay on mine and that way we won’t have any problems. I’d like to suggest to you that as followers of Jesus, our motto should not be ‘good fences make good neighbours’ but ‘good neighbours make no fences.’ We don’t put boundaries around who we love. But instead we invite them in and love them with the love that God has loved us first.

Loving God means loving others unconditionally.

BENEDICTION

1 Th. 3:12-13 - May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

ⁱ <https://summitview.com/blog/i-am-derek-chauvin/>

ⁱⁱ 18 " 'Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against *one of your people*, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD (Lev 19:18 NIV). That being said, listen to Leviticus 19:33-34, just a few verses later: 33 " 'When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. 34 The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the LORD your God" (Lev 19:33-34 NIV). That sure sounds like God intends for us to treat the ‘Other’ like neighbours too.

ⁱⁱⁱ D. E. Oakman, quoted in David Garland’s *Luke* (ZECNT), p. 445.

^{iv} It’s interesting that just as ‘The Good Samaritan’ is known outside of its larger context (that is, the conversation about loving God), the saying ‘Good fences make good neighbours’ is also known outside of its context: ‘The Mending Wall’ by Robert Frost. And ironically, where the saying seems to be an aphorism expressing the wisdom of building walls, the larger poem actually questions the value of such walls. It’s very subtle, but the poem wants us to ask ‘Are walls really such a good thing?’