

January 12, 2020

National Presbyterian Church

## **"Caring for Body and Soul"**

(The Good Samaritan and the story of Mary and Martha)

Luke 10:25-42

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In our sermons this winter we're looking at the story of Jesus through the lens of one of the four accounts we have in the Bible: the account of St. Luke. And we come today to Luke 10, and to two of the more famous stories in Luke's account, neither of which are recorded in the other gospels, but only in Luke: the story of a person we call "the Good Samaritan"; and then the story of Jesus' visit to the home of two friends, two sisters, Mary and Martha.

These are wonderful, memorable stories; but nevertheless, they are stories which in some ways seem to conflict with each other, or at least stand in tension with each other. And it's these stories and their relationship that I would like us to explore this morning. Let me show you what I mean about this "tension."

In the first story, Jesus tells of a man who is beaten up on the lonely and desolate road going down (3000 feet or so) from Jerusalem to Jericho. And some religious people (temple officials: a priest is a person who offers sacrifices and prayers in the temple; and a Levite is a member of the temple choir) pass by – people who have just been in Jerusalem presumably worshiping God in the Temple there. BUT these religious people do nothing about the man in need. Instead, they pass by on the other side of the road.

On the other hand, a Samaritan

-- a religious heretic who doesn't believe in the sanctity of Jerusalem and its temple as the Jews did, but whose worship (linked to his belief in the location of God's presence) focuses on a different place called Shechem (the modern day town of Nablus, at the foot of Mount Gerizim in what is now the "West Bank") --

(this Samaritan) sees the man, understands there's a problem, stops his journey, and engages in an overflowing act of compassion and generosity. In fact, we read that this is what happened:

1. He was moved with pity
2. He went to the man lying there.
3. He bandaged his wounds.
4. He poured oil and wine on them.
5. He put him on his own animal.
6. He brought him to an inn.
7. He took care of him.
8. The next day he took out two denarii (that's two day's wages probably around \$250) and gave them to the innkeeper
9. and said 'Take care of him
10. and when I come back I will repay you whatever you spend.'

And clearly Jesus tells this story with a sense of enormous admiration, and affirmation for the Samaritan! That is: *even though the man doesn't worship God or love God in the right way; even though he believes some of the wrong things; yet from Jesus' point of view he does the right thing, and is to be praised.*

Which might lead us to think that in the next story – when Jesus visits the home of Mary and Martha in the small town of Bethany just across the valley from Jerusalem – Jesus would take Martha's side as she works hard to care for Jesus (and perhaps all his 12 disciples have entered the house with him!) as an act of hospitality. Remember: hospitality was and IS a big thing in the Mediterranean world; and Martha feels the normal obligation to be the “hostess with the mostest.”

So Jesus arrives in Bethany, and Martha is like a busy-bee around the house while sister Mary does NOTHING. She just sits at Jesus' feet and listens to whatever he says. And when Martha creates a stink, and says:

“Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me!” {= to DO something!!}

Jesus replies with:

“Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is only one thing needful. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”

In other words, against the odds, Jesus defends Mary, who is simply sitting there doing nothing but listening!

Which seems like the opposite of the message of the Good Samaritan. That (among other things) even a heretic who loves is better than religious people who go to worship and sit there (or sing or preach or pray), but when the moment comes, they don't lift a finger to help a person in need.

SO WHAT'S GOING ON HERE? Well, let me take you back to the beginning of our passage at Luke 10:25, where a lawyer (not just a secular lawyer, as we would understand it, but a Biblical scholar who knows the law of the land – the Biblical laws of Moses – back to front) comes up to Jesus and asks a question:

“Teacher,” the legal scholar said, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

<sup>26</sup> Jesus said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?”

<sup>27</sup> The scholar of the Law answers from the Law of Moses (*quoting Deuteronomy 6.5, and Leviticus 19.18*)

# 1. “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

# 2. your neighbor as yourself.”

<sup>28</sup> And Jesus said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

Do what? Love BOTH God and neighbor. Not one or the other – but both. And the two stories deal with the 2 sides of this one coin: loving both God and neighbor. God first; Neighbor second.

Though, in our passage Jesus explains “love of neighbor” first, simply because the man asks the small print question, “Who is my neighbor?”

which – which we should notice – Jesus never answers directly!

- Perhaps because the man is not really looking for an answer, but only for a theological discussion
- Perhaps because the man wants to justify himself – to limit the extent of any love for neighbor that he obliged to show.

So, for whatever reason, Jesus deliberately focuses NOT on answering “Who is my neighbor?” but on “How to BE a neighbor.” And in this he tells his story about “lavish love” – love that seems to know no limits.

Remember the Samaritan? Think about his unlimited, unrestrained, lavish love again:

1. He was moved with pity (his emotions were impacted)
2. He went to the man lying there. (he changed his location)
3. He bandaged his wounds. (he found resources; surely he wasn't carrying bandages with him, but had to use some other material to do the job?)
4. He poured oil and wine on them. (he used his own luxuries)
5. He put him on his own animal. (he lent him, as it were, his car!)
6. He brought him to an inn. (he found institutional resources)
7. He took care of him. (he was practical)
8. The next day he took out two denarii (that's two day's wages probably around \$250) and gave them to the innkeeper (he was financially generous)
9. and said ‘Take care of him (he delegated tasks)
10. and when I come back I will repay you whatever you spend.’ (he looked into the future and anticipated further costs )

Have YOU ever loved lavishly like that? Or let me put it like this – have you ever been the recipient of lavish love like that? It changes things, when we receive such love.

When I first came to the United States as a student in 1971, I joined a church in Schenectady, NY, that encouraged me to consider God's call to the ministry. And they pledged that if I felt called to the ministry, and to attend seminary, then they'd pay my way. Which they did. Large numbers of people in that church (smaller than ours) – tithed. And I was one of 4 seminary students whom they supported at that time (out of more than a hundred in a 30 year period). Fully supported: every nickel and dime, including my initial pastor library, so that I emerged without a penny of debt!

The love was overflowing!

Or when I was ill, down and out with prostate cancer about 15 years ago.

One of my friends, the local Rabbi, had a gorgeous voice. He asked me at lunch one time, if he could do anything for me, and I casually mentioned that I loved his singing of scripture. And so, out of the blue, on the evening after my surgery, when I was still pretty loopy, he came into my room in the darkness, and sang (canted) from Deuteronomy. It was a holy moment of generous love, and I believe, healing power. He bandaged up my wounds with his voice.

When we've seen and been blessed with generous love like that, says Jesus, we've seen and experienced the love that we owe need to show to others – to our neighbor, whoever they may be.

- How to BE a neighbor . . .

- Not “WHO is my neighbor?”

Because to Jesus, the truth is that anyone in need is my neighbor. In other words, we’ve been called by Jesus, not only to love our friends, but our enemies!

Professor and author, C.S. Lewis, puts the call to love in a more “theological framework” like this, in a sermon he preached in the middle of WWII:

The load, or weight, or burden of my neighbor’s glory {DR: as a person made in the image of God} should be laid daily on my back, a load so heavy that only humility can carry it, and the backs of the proud will be broken.

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship . . . **There are no ordinary people.** You have never talked to a *mere* mortal . . . It is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit . . . And so our Love . . . must be real and costly. Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses.

[edited from *The Weight of Glory*, June 8, 1941, Church of St. Mary the Virgin, Oxford]

So, in Luke 10:30-37, Jesus teaches us what it means to be a neighbor – lavishly; and to love your neighbor, whoever they may be. But what he doesn’t deal with here (because he’s responding to the lawyer’s specific question by teaching about the Samaritan) is the first of the two commandments that are mentioned: Loving God.

The two commandments are intimately related, indeed they must never be separated. BUT they are NOT the same.

Sure . . .

- Faith without works is dead (says the Letter of James, 2:14-17)
- OR: as 1 John 4:20 says explicitly , “You cannot say you love God whom you have not seen, if you do not love your neighbor whom you HAVE seen!”

But on the other hand . . . you can love your neighbor for a million different reasons, but also spit in the face of the God who made you, and ignore his Son who died for you. AND THAT’S NO GOOD EITHER.

In fact the late Donald Miller, former President at Pittsburgh Seminary,

puts it like this . . (in the *Layman’s Commentary on Luke*):

The close relation of the story of Martha and Mary to that of the Good Samaritan {DR: is clear} . . . service in the name of love may degenerate into mere human activity empty of eternal value, if it is divorced from constant communion with the one who is the source of all good.

Which is precisely why I believe that Luke (remember: Luke chooses to include these two stories that the other three gospel writers omit) puts these two seemingly conflicting stories, side by side.

- In the first story, the priest and the Levite have been in Jerusalem, LOVING GOD in worship. But when the moment comes to love their neighbor they pass the man and the opportunity by on the other side. They care for soul, not for body. (This is not good!)
- In the second story, Martha is the Good Samaritan. She’s loving and busy caring for the body (as we often ought to be) but the soul gets lost in the shuffle. (This is not good either).

Rather, in the second story, it's Mary who is the one who has realized that the SON OF GOD (God in human flesh), has just walked into her house. And she stops. And is still. **And LISTENS** . . . **which is actually the primary and primal act of worship**: listening.

- In the Garden of Eden (in Genesis 2-3), the first sin was not the eating of the fruit on the tree, but the NOT listening to what God had said about the fruit and the eating.
- And with the lawyer who asks about eternal life, as I mentioned earlier, he's not really interested in listening to Jesus; he's far more interested in justifying himself, defending himself. Whereas, when we become "listeners of God" we drop all our claims on God, all self-defense.

I tell people: when you come to the pearly gates, keep your mouth shut! Avoid the temptation at all costs of speaking; of telling God about all you have done for God. Just zip it and LISTEN. And let God tell you how much God loves YOU – lavishly! (God is the ultimate Good Samaritan who picks all of us up at the side of the road). Let God tell you about all that God has done FOR YOU, without which we're all lost, eternally.

- Some of you may remember last week's Scripture in Luke 9

Jesus was on a mountain with his friends, Peter, James and John. And they heard God's voice, pointing them in Jesus' direction, saying: "THIS is my Son: LISTEN to him". .

In other words:

You want to honor GOD? (then, listen to Jesus!)

You want to worship GOD? (then, listen to Jesus!)

You want to love GOD? (then listen to Jesus!)

And what is Mary doing when the Son of God enters her house?

She is sitting at Jesus' feet: LISTENING (the same word in Greek, by the way, in the house for Mary as on the mountaintop for the disciples).

Let me read Luke 10:25-28 again:

"What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Asks the Biblical scholar

<sup>26</sup>Jesus said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?"

<sup>27</sup>The man 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."

<sup>28</sup>And Jesus said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." . . .

Not one without the other, but both:

Love God – first

Love Neighbor – too. Whoever that neighbor may be.

This is the life for which we were created.

This is the life that God can use as a channel to bring his love and care and presence to many.

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