

“Surprising Servants”

Luke 10:25-37 (The Good Samaritan)

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George Burns once said: “The secret of a good sermon is to have a good beginning and a good ending and to have the two as close together as possible.”

I will do my best! (I hope this quote can count as my good beginning!)

Today we finish our mini-series on several of Jesus’ parables. As we have studied the parables in worship, our children and youth have studied the same parables in Sunday School. In the past weeks we have explored “The Sower and the Seed,” “The Shrewd Manager,” “The Wise and Foolish Builders,” “The Great Banquet,” and “The Lost Son.”

“P.G. Wodehouse, a British humorist, has one of his characters refer to a parable of Jesus as looking like a ‘straightforward yarn when you begin to read it,’ but then you find it has ‘something up its sleeve that pops out at you and leaves you flat.’” J. Ellsworth Kalas, from whose book I drew this quote, softens this a bit to say that it is his hope that the parables will “not so much leave us flat—but (leave us) examining our souls” (*Parables from the Back Side: Bible Stories with a Twist*, J. Ellsworth Kalas, p. 9).

The Parable of the Good Samaritan, though one of the more familiar parables, still leaves us examining our souls—over and over again. Sometimes it even leaves us flat.

Today’s lesson is a story within a story. Jesus recounts a real event. He encounters a Jewish lawyer—really a Jewish theologian—who studied the Law of Moses (the first five books of the Old Testament). This “lawyer” was not concerned about putting people in or getting people out of jail. His focus was the Law of Moses, which was THE Law for God’s people.

This theologian asks Jesus, perhaps to trick him or back him in a corner as so many others did: “What do I need to do to get eternal life?” Good question. Perhaps THE question.

Jesus responds from the Law—yes THE Law. “Love God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength. Love your neighbor as yourself.” Good answer. Maybe too good.

Like us, the theologian tries to find a loophole. He was smart enough to know that Jesus probably had in mind a broader definition of “neighbor”—even a definition that might be at odds with his belief of staying away from certain people because they weren’t people of God.

Regrettably, as all humans tend to do, some Jews of Jesus’ day had more and more seen themselves as privileged—set apart by God more for privilege than responsibility. Some misunderstood being set apart for a divine purpose as a right to exclusivity. Neighbors—the types you share barbeques and church suppers with, babysit each other’s kids, or borrow a cup of sugar from—were OK. The theologian had a hunch Jesus had something more in mind.

There were also misunderstandings about Messiah. Jesus didn’t fit the bill as far as some were concerned. He came from a Podunk town called Nazareth. He was a

carpenter's son. He challenged their beliefs and practices at every turn. And there was no way this guy could ever be a military conqueror of the oppressive Romans. There was no way this guy could help them. There was no way he could save them. No way could he be the Messiah. If he was the helper, the deliverer, the Messiah, some wanted no part of him or his help.

It's within this context and in response to the theologian's question and answer that Jesus tells the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

Who were the Samaritans? The Jews and the Samaritans had shared a mutual dislike or hatred for one another for hundreds of years. "Samaritans were descendants of a mixed population occupying the land (of Israel) following the conquest by Assyria in 722 B.C. They opposed rebuilding the temple and Jerusalem and constructed their own place of worship on Mount Gerizim." The Jews viewed the Samaritans as "ceremonially unclean, socially outcast, religiously heretical—totally opposite from the lawyer/theologian who asked the question and the priest and Levite whom Jesus includes in his parable (*Luke Interpretation Commentary*, Fred Craddock, p. 150).

The story goes that a man—presumed to be a Jewish man—goes on a journey and gets beat up, robbed, and left for dead by bandits. Two religious people—a priest and a Levite—walked past the man and didn't help him. These were the expected helpers in the story—church folk, people like the man on the roadside.

Then a Samaritan—yes, a Samaritan—stops and helps the beat up man (the Jew). He helps him, saves his life, does everything he can do to restore the man to wholeness, and pays for everything. The Samaritan is the unlikely, surprising, unexpected and perhaps even unwanted helper in the story.

Clearly, we can apply this story in many ways.

Maybe you identify at this moment with the priest and Levite. We ponder all the people we've passed by—especially the people different from us, the ones we don't like, our enemies. We understand that the dilemmas facing the priest and Levite are not simple ones. Whether we think in local or global terms there are many people we pass by every day who are suffering on the roadside of life. It's just not easy—not simple, this matter of helping our neighbors. Nevertheless, today we examine our souls and ponder the times we've walked by and left the suffering along the road.

All of us today surely identify with the Good Samaritan, as well. We have at times stopped to help. We have given money to the suffering close to home and far away. We have been there for people who were on the roadside. We have been faithful at times, by the grace of God. Sometimes, we've even surprised ourselves.

And, we've also been surprised by those who've helped us, even when we weren't so sure we wanted their help. Within our broad Christian community even, we are not so sure certain Christians can help us. We're not sure we want to be helped by certain Christians.

Several years ago I attended the National Pastor's Conference in San Diego, California. I knew that most of the speakers and workshop leaders were not Presbyterian, so I went with excitement, but also some caution. I was particularly eager to hear Rick Warren (author of *The Purpose Driven Life*) speak, although I was pretty sure I wouldn't be helped much by what he had to say. After all, he wasn't Presbyterian. Some of my Presbyterian buddies had criticized the book as too simple (and we Presbyterians are rather proud folk and often think if something isn't complicated it can't possibly be right

or helpful). Truth is, I didn't want his sermon to help me. He's different from me. He pastors a mega church and we have all kinds of notions about those guys. He's written a simple book that everyone (except my Presbyterian buddies) seems to like. And, to beat all, he shows up at a National Pastor's Conference to preach in casual pants and a very casual shirt. Surely, I couldn't be helped by this guy.

But, as I listened, I found his message sincere, honest, real, filled with passion and integrity. The words he spoke weren't all new to me, but they were nevertheless transforming. I left having been helped spiritually—in my walk as a Christian pastor—despite all my prejudices and preconceived notions.

I've been further inspired by Rick Warren (although I want to be careful about exalting any Christian leader since we are all sinners subject to falling at any time). I recently read in the July 10, 2006 edition of *Newsweek* that Warren "reverse tithes." With *Purpose Driven Life* a bestseller, Rick Warren and his wife "give away 90 percent of what he earns (rather than the traditional tithe of 10 percent). He's also paid back his salary to his church, retroactively, for the past 25 years, enough to launch three foundations." "Earlier this year he launched a plan called 'PEACE,' in which small groups of church members choose a remote village that needs help, travel there, provide aid (addressing poverty, hunger, literacy, health issues), make sure the leaders can replicate it, and then leave. Already, more than 6,000 members of the church Warren leads, have made such pilgrimages" (*Newsweek*, July 10, 2006, p. 66).

Boy, am I surprised. I thought mega churches and their pastors had no concern for the poor or the broken of the world! Maybe even THEY can help us after all.

We've stopped to identify with the priest, the Levite and the Samaritan. But what about the beat up guy? Yes, we've pondered how we are sometimes surprised when we are helped by surprising Christians. But what about those other surprising servants who've helped us when we have been beat up along the side of the road? We've all experienced lying beside the road—broken, bleeding, lost, nearly dead. We've had physical problems along the way—some of you devastating illnesses. You've been on the roadside. All of us have had times of emotional despair—there by the roadside with people passing by not even seeing our pain. We've been alongside the road grieving. We've been there confused and angry. We've been lying there afraid to live and afraid to die. Some of us have been on the roadside beat up by addictions we can't seem to overcome. We wonder if we will be left to die. Some of us have financial difficulties that leave us by the roadside, helpless and afraid.

Some have passed us by. It happens to all of us. But some have helped us in amazing ways. Some of us have watched religion (the shallow "in name only" kind of religion) pass us by as the priest and Levite passed the beat up man. We've seen wealth and power pass us by. At first we thought they were the way to healing. Surely with enough wealth and power I'll never end up nearly dead on the side of the road. But even with the many things and the many people who may have passed us by, I imagine all of us can recount a time when someone surprising has helped us when all the rest have passed us by.

For the Jewish lawyer/theologian, seeing himself as the beat up guy in the story was out of the question. Even more out of the question was envisioning a Samaritan coming to his rescue, were he ever in this position. To suggest that the priest and Levite who walked past him might point to the failure of "religion" and wealth to address his

deepest human need would have been too much for him to handle. And, for the Samaritan to have paid for everything—to have done everything that needed to be done for the Jew--was downright offensive.

J. Ellsworth Kalas (whom I mentioned earlier) suggests that Jesus is our Good Samaritan. He's an outsider. Because of sin we are enemies. We are the beaten up ones alongside the road—sin and the brokenness resulting from sin have left us on the road, given up for dead. Religion and wealth have passed us by. They haven't saved us or healed us. But Jesus, our "Samaritan" has saved our lives, he has drawn us up from the pit along the roadside, he has rescued us from the grip of death.

Jesus comes to us along the roadside. He bandages our wounds. He saves our lives. And, we don't pay him a thing.

Imagine the beat up man in the parable waking up to discover that the surprising man who saved his life had also paid for everything. What do I need to pay back, he asked I'm sure? Nothing, said the innkeeper. He's taken care of it all.

Kalas tells it this way: "A Samaritan indeed! But he volunteers to help. We try to explain: 'I can pay my own way. I'm a deserving person, you know.' The Stranger answers, 'No one can purchase what I offer, nor can anyone deserve it. But I shall be glad to give it to you.' And he lifts us to his donkey, a wondrously awkward beast called Grace.

"But you and I don't want that kind of help. This Samaritan embarrasses us by his very kindness and mercy, because he won't let us pay our way, and because he isn't impressed by our credentials. It is a gift that we can never, in any way, repay. Sometimes we think we'd rather die in our lostness than humble ourselves to receive this Stranger's gift.

"I have a feeling that the dying man in Jesus' parable must have felt that way when his help came by way of a despised Samaritan, and I know full well that you and I draw back when God's Eternal Samaritan extends his offer. We accept him only when our need is so desperate that we must accept him; only when we see what love this Divine Samaritan offers.

"Only then are we willing to be lifted onto the donkey called Grace and ride it, alongside Christ the Samaritan, into God's safe and eternal lodging" (p. 17).

The "scandal of the Gospel" remains as penetrating for us today as it was for the lawyer/theologian of Jesus' day. We are saved by grace and grace alone. We cannot earn or pay for this gift.

Today let us go forth grateful for the Good Samaritan, Jesus. May that gratitude empower us to be Good Samaritans to others and to point them to Jesus. Let us allow Christ "to lift us onto the donkey called Grace and ride it, alongside Christ the Samaritan, into God's safe and eternal lodging" (p. 17).