

The Good Samaritan
Luke 10:25–37
Sunday, October 4, 2026
(World Communion Sunday)

Let us pray: Lord, overcome all the barriers that keep us from *hearing* you and *knowing* you and *loving* you, so that we might also *hear* and *know* and *love* each other, in Jesus' name. Amen.

This week and next week, we are going to be looking at two of Jesus' most well-known parables. Next week, we will be looking at the Parable of the Prodigal Son, and this week we are looking at the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

We hear that phrase, "Good Samaritan" a lot, especially in the news. Just the other week in Central Florida, a husband and wife were out taking a walk on a trail, like they do every Wednesday evening. They were holding hands and holding an umbrella, when they got struck by lightning. The woman stopped breathing, and the man was so hurt that he could not get up to help her. Four people in a running club happened to be running by on the trail at that exact moment, and they stopped to help. They called for emergency assistance and started performing CPR on the woman, bringing her back to life. Today that couple is fine, and the news refers to the four people who saved them as *Good Samaritans*.

That's how we think about that term Good Samaritan. When someone stops to help a stranger who is in trouble, that person is a Good Samaritan. It's not just helping out your *friend*. It's when you go out of your way to help a stranger. And we get that phrase and that idea from this parable that Jesus tells.

A lawyer, an expert in Jewish law, comes to Jesus and asks him, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus asks him, "What does the *law* say?" The lawyer says, "Love God and love your neighbor." Jesus says, "Right!" But the lawyer says, "Who is my neighbor?" Who do I have to love, and who can I get

away with *not* loving? So Jesus tells him a story. A man gets attacked, robbed, and left for dead. A priest comes by and sees him, but he doesn't help. Then a Levite (like an assistant priest) comes by and sees him, but *he* doesn't help. Then a Samaritan comes by, and he helps him. "Which one of the three," Jesus asks, "was a neighbor to the man?" The lawyer says, "The one who showed him mercy." And Jesus says, "Go and do likewise." So this man is referred to as the "good" Samaritan, because he was a Samaritan who did this good thing, gave of himself to help this stranger in need. But there's actually a whole lot more going on in this story, and it has to do with *who Samaritans were*.

Samaritans and Jews had a long history. They actually *all* used to be Israelites. They were the *same*. They all came from the same place and practiced the same religion. But in the year 722 B.C., the army of Assyria (which we know today as Iraq), invaded and conquered the northern part of Israel. The capital of the northern part of Israel was a city called Samaria. So when the Assyrians conquered Samaria, they took a lot of the Israelites and shipped them off to Assyria to live in exile there, and a lot of the Assyrians stayed in Samaria. They married Jewish women and had children with them, creating this group of people that wasn't really Jewish, but wasn't really Assyrian. And they combined Assyrian religious practices with Jewish religious practices.

So when the people of Israel finally came back from exile in Assyria, they came home to this new group of people who had changed their religion into something else. They weren't "real" Jews. The Jewish people who had been in exile in Assyria, they had held on to their faith and their identity there. And then they come home and see these people who didn't do that, so they looked down on the Samaritans. They weren't as pure or holy as "real" Jewish people. They didn't do things the right way or believe the right things. They didn't worship the right way, in the right places.

Over the years this tension between Jews and Samaritans just grew and grew until Jews and Samaritans *hated* each other. Jewish people were actually forbidden from interacting with Samaritans. They couldn't talk to them, couldn't marry them. There's a place in Matthew's gospel where Jesus forbids his disciples from going into a Samaritan town. And then right before this story in Luke's gospel, Jesus and his disciples try to go into a Samaritan town, but they won't receive them. They're not welcome there. These were two groups of people who absolutely did not get along. The Jewish people said that the Samaritans had distorted their Jewish faith and identity. They had forsaken their God, so they said that God wanted nothing to do with them.

So do you find it a little odd that we refer to people as Good Samaritans today? The Jewish people *despised* Samaritans. Samaritans were like this half-breed group of heathens. They were the last people you would ever expect to do anything good or go out of their way to help anyone. So do we know what we're actually saying about people when we call them Good Samaritans today? Because *all* Samaritans were *bad* Samaritans. That's why he's referred to as the "Good" Samaritan. He's the exception to the rule, like he's the only one. Because there *were no* good Samaritans. The Samaritan was not supposed to be the hero of this story. His presence here is supposed to shock us and disorient us. Because Samaritans were not capable of anything good.

This story would have *surprised* Jesus' audience and potentially been *offensive* to them. Because Jesus is implying that a Samaritan is more compassionate, more faithful, and a better neighbor than the most faithful Jewish people. And Jesus is saying, "You want to be faithful? You want to follow God and inherit eternal life? Be like that Samaritan. Be like this person that you *hate*."

Jesus *could* have just said, "You want to inherit eternal life? Show mercy." But that wouldn't really carry the same weight, would it? We wouldn't remember that as much as we remember *this*. So instead

he tells this parable that forces us to really think about it. Jesus is pushing us to look deeper, at other people and at ourselves. He's saying, "That person you hate, that person you look down on, that person you think is worthless and can't possibly be capable of anything good, that person you *think* you know and understand and have figured out, take another look. Because they might actually know and understand something about God, about the world, and about you that you don't even see."

This is not just about "loving your enemy." It's also about taking another look at who you think your enemy is.

The Hebrew word for *neighbor* that Jesus would have used is the word *rea*. It's made up of two letters, *resh*, which is like our letter *r*, and *ayin*, which doesn't really have an English equivalent. But essentially *r* and *a*. One of the Hebrew words for *enemy* is the word *ar*. Those exact same two letters, *resh* and *ayin*, reversed. It is a reflection of this notion that our enemies and our neighbors aren't all that different. It's possible to look at an *enemy* and see the makings of a *neighbor*.

You think maybe that's what Jesus was getting at? That our neighbors and our enemies can look exactly the same. That the challenge for us is to look at our *enemies* and see something good in *them*, too. Amy-Jill Levine is a Jewish New Testament scholar, and she says it this way, that "to understand this parable...we need to be able to see the image of God in everyone, not just members of our group."¹ Not just people who *look* like us or *sound* like us or *think* like us. And what this day – World Communion Sunday – reminds us of is that we are *all* neighbors. We are *all* children of God, created in the image of God, members of the same family.

¹ [Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew*](#), pg. 148.

It's funny that the question Jesus is originally asked – “Who is my neighbor?” – is not the question that actually gets *answered*. The lawyer asks, “Who is my neighbor,” Jesus tells this story, and then says, “Which one of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” The lawyer says, “The one who showed him mercy.” And Jesus says, “Go and do likewise.” The lawyer asks, “Who is my neighbor,” and Jesus says, “Go *be* a neighbor.”

It's not about defining the boundaries of who my neighbor is; who's *in* and who's *out*. Who do I *have* to love and who am I *exempt* from loving? It's about *being* a neighbor. The question is not, “Who is my neighbor,” but, “Am I *being* a neighbor?” We can't be so concerned about who our neighbor *is* and the *differences* between us that it keeps us from *acting* like a neighbor. Because mercy – unexpected kindness and compassion – is a choice that you can make, regardless of this other person. It is in your hands to be merciful. It's not, “Who is my neighbor,” but, “Am I a neighbor?” Do I show mercy? That's the question that Jesus is asking here. And it's the question he wants us to ask ourselves.

You cannot control who this other person is, what they believe, or what they do. All you can control is who *you* are, what *you* believe, and what *you* do; how *you* choose to live from a place of love and kindness and compassion and mercy for this other person. We don't get to choose our neighbors, but we can choose the kind of neighbors we will *be*. May you be the kind of neighbor that Jesus tells stories about. Amen.