

Sermon for 13th July 2025, Year C, Pentecost 5, Proper 10

Preached at St Serf's Shettleston

Luke 10:25-37

Sermon

The Good Samaritan is almost certainly Jesus' most famous parable. It's so famous that the phrase 'Good Samaritan' has entered our language to mean anyone who does a good deed where it might have been easier to ignore the situation and go on our way.

It's certainly a story that can make us feel guilty if we fail to help someone in need because we're in a hurry or are tired or simply overwhelmed by compassion fatigue.

Like the lawyer who is testing Jesus, we often want to know where the legitimate boundaries are on our charity. How much does God really expect of us? What's the pass mark for heaven? How often should we go to church? How many hours of prayer? How much money must we give? How many sessions should I volunteer at the foodbank? How many Big Issues must I buy? How many years must I serve on the Vestry? There must be limits - our time & energy are limited; we can't help everyone.

For the lawyer in the story, his concern is more about who's included and who's excluded from his charity, rather than how frequently he must respond. What he really believes is that charity begins at home – and ends at home. He'll work tirelessly for his neighbour but wants to carefully define who the neighbour is. Yes, we do this too. We often prefer to give to local charities rather than national or international ones, because we see local results. We'll happily pay taxes for the NHS but not for foreign aid. We like the idea of low-cost housing for local people, but not so much for immigrants and asylum seekers. Like the

lawyer, we nod vigorously when Jesus says we should love God and love our neighbour as ourselves, but in practice we all have our limits. Some people are more worthy of our charity than others, and some we think are not worthy at all.

So, Jesus tells all of us the parable. A man is beaten and stripped naked and left for dead on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. This road was so dangerous in Jesus' day that it was known as the Way of Blood because of the number of bandits harassing travellers.

Martin Luther King in his 'I've been to the mountaintop' speech the day before his death, points out that the priest and the Levite would have been terrified not so much of ritual contamination or the expense of having to bury a dead body, as of the risk that it might be a trap, that the bandits might still be around. *Their* first thought on being confronted by someone else's need was to rationalise that their own need was greater. They saw someone in trouble and their first thought was 'what about me?' These are the keepers of the religious tradition, but their understanding of love and their understanding of neighbour do not really extend the width of the road.

In the story, the man is naked. His nakedness is important. It prevents us judging whether he *deserves* our love, pity and assistance. The priest and Levite can't tell if he's middle class, one of their own, or some homeless guy who's probably already refused all help and hardly deserves a second glance. It's always easy to convince ourselves there's nothing we can do.

The Samaritan on the other hand, brings a jarring shock to the middle of the story that is completely lost on most of us two thousand years on. Samaritans were the remnants of Israelites conquered by the Assyrians, and then left behind when the Jews were taken into exile in Babylon. They worshipped the same God, and had the same Hebrew scriptures, but they worshipped at a temple at Mount Gerizim instead of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. And it's safe to say

that the Jews and Samaritans absolutely hated each other and thought of each other as morally corrupt and heretical – probably not dissimilar to sectarian violence between Protestants and Catholics during the Reformation and, of course, in the centuries since.

Only one chapter ago in the gospel of Luke, you will remember that Jesus was turned away from a Samaritan village which he'd intended to visit, simply because they'd heard he was travelling to Jerusalem. James and John, those hotheads, were so insulted they asked Jesus if they should call down fire to destroy the place. Jesus rebuked them at the time, but I wonder if this parable featuring the hated Samaritan as a neighbour and saviour, might have been a not-so-subtle teaching moment for James and John as well.

The point is, Jesus wants us to be shocked and surprised at where the compassion is coming from. In his parable we, like the lawyer, might initially identify with the priest and the Levite – the religious people who carefully follow society's rules and expectations – but Jesus really wants the lawyer and us to realise that we are the beaten and bruised half-dead naked man who is about to be loved by someone whose goodness he does not expect or deserve or understand.

This is the real power of the parable. It's not just a story to encourage us in persistent and unconditional kindness towards the undeserving outsider, although it does do that. It's a story that brings us up short when we realise that the times when we've been most moved by someone's love and care for us has been when that love has come from the most unexpected quarters, perhaps even from someone who should by rights hate or disdain us. And perhaps it's that shock that jolts us out of our comfort zone and makes us want to go and do likewise.

So if we find it hard to be a Good Samaritan, perhaps it's because we've not yet experienced being the beaten-up man in the road. It's often not until we have

received undeserved charity or forgiveness ourselves, that we become motivated and liberated to offer that same gift to others.

For example, I came to faith in the first place because when I got mad at a Christian at college and peppered him with insults, he apologised and was kind to me in response. I expected him to hate or ignore me, but he received and acknowledged my fury and anguish which was not really directed at him, held my pain, and took me to the inn, or in my case the college bar, and told me about his friend Jesus.

And I wonder if anyone remembers that famous scene in the film 'Good Will Hunting' where the psychologist played by Robin Williams finally breaks through the emotional hurts and barriers of Matt Damon's abused character Will, by telling him repeatedly, "It's not your fault. It's not your fault. It's not your fault". I choke up every time I see it. The two characters have been at each other's throats for most of the movie, but in the moment of crisis, it is Will Hunting's nemesis who opens the door to him first forgiving himself, and then forgiving those who have hurt him.

Jesus finishes his parable by turning the lawyer's challenge back on himself. 'Who was the one who was the neighbour?' he asks. The lawyer can't bring himself to say, 'The Samaritan', and many preachers have speculated that this is because he hates them so much, he can't even say their name. But I wonder if he's had a revelation that really, he's the one who's naked and beaten, and right at this moment it's his opponent in the debate, Jesus, who is unexpectedly showing him mercy, offering him a way out from his arrogance and frustration. And perhaps, in this moment, he also has a glimmer of an idea that this Jesus, the one who continues to reach out and love even those who ignore or reject him, is God himself.