

# Sermon: Pentecost 5

Mr. Evans DeVries

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Year C

Deuteronomy 30:9-14

Psalm 25:1-9

Colossians 1:1-14

Luke 10:25-37

Today's gospel reading is interesting to me in several ways. For one thing, it has jumped the wall of separation between church and state and entered our common language. Rescuers are regularly referred to as "good Samaritans" in news media and, I suspect, in normal conversation, as well. Laws designed to protect these helpers from law suits stemming from their efforts are formally known as "Good Samaritan Laws". I can't think of any other bible story that has achieved that status. It's also interesting that nowhere in scripture is the Samaritan actually called "good". As you probably remember, there was a great deal of animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans, despite the fact that the Samaritans also based their faith on the Pentateuch (although the Samaritan version had some differences). The Samaritans were the product of the intermarriage between pagan tribes that had been settled in the former northern kingdom of Israel by conquering Assyrians and the locals left behind when the vanquished Jews were taken away into captivity. They were as racially pure in their Jewishness as the returnees from the Babylonian captivity, according to Franciscan author Pat McClosky.

Probably the most serious point of difference between the two groups was where they should worship, or the position or role of Jerusalem. The Samaritans had offered to help in the rebuilding of the temple after the return of the exiles from Babylon, but their help was refused. Eventually, the Samaritans began to worship at Mt. Gerizim. The Book of Ezra in chapter 4 and Nehemiah in chapter 13 give the whole story from the Jewish perspective. So, it comes as no surprise that when Jesus asked the woman at the well for a drink in John 4:9, she reminded him that Jews do not associate with Samaritans. Jews called Samaritans "dogs" and "half-breeds" and, as we saw a few weeks ago in Luke 9:54, when the Samaritans did not properly receive Jesus, James

and John asked, “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” Pat McClosky says that Samaritan villages were actually burned down, although I doubt it was by divine fire. For their part, the Samaritans were not blameless, themselves. According to the ancient historian Josephus, they harassed pilgrims traveling to Jerusalem and even defiled the temple by scattering human bones there. Obviously, there was no love lost between the Jews and the Samaritans. The Jews considered all Samaritans bad, so today’s protagonist becomes “good” only by comparison. Also interesting in today’s reading is the role of the lawyer. His first question initiates the discussion, but it is asked to test Jesus, according to most translations. The lawyer’s second question, which gives rise to the good Samaritan story, has a different motivation, according to the dozen or so commentaries that I have read. The question “Who is my neighbor?” is seen, at least by contemporary writers, as the stuff of the lawyer’s job. On the first day in law school and constantly thereafter, lawyers are taught that the mission of the law is to provide certainty in all matters, civil and criminal. One would think that the answer to “Who is my neighbor?” is obvious. Not necessarily.

There is an exercise used with potential lawyers that illustrates this. Perhaps you have run into it. A city commission writes an ordinance banning vehicles in the city park. On its face it is as obvious and straight forward as “Who is my neighbor?”, but consider these questions:

If someone has a heart attack, can an ambulance enter the park?

Are wheel chairs and/or walkers banned?

Are vendors’ hot dog, beverage or ice cream carts prohibited?

Are bicycles, roller skates and/or skate boards outlawed?

How about baby buggies and strollers?

You get the idea. “Who is my neighbor?”, in today’s case, is not a trap or test. For a person who is used to dealing in “certainty”, it’s a legitimate question whose answer isn’t obvious.

Getting back to today’s reading, David Lose, pastor of Mt. Olivet Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, says that God expects us to not only care for our neighbor, but to see as our neighbor anyone in need. Lose sees that as the issue here. The priest and the Levite don’t see the injured man as a neighbor, but as a burden, something that will delay or interfere with what ever activity caused them to be on that road. The Samaritan, on the other hand, sees the injured man as someone who inherently deserves his time and attention. Lose notes that many of us, like the priest and the Levite in the story, tend to overlook those who are different from ourselves. But, he says, we must remember that God created all people in His image and that Christ died for all people. Both God’s acts of creation and redemption, Pastor Lose says, signal that at the heart of the Christian faith is the belief that ALL people have inherent worth and dignity.

Even when dealing with those who are like us in many, possibly even most ways, it may be difficult to help. Karoline Lewis from Luther Seminary writes, “We expend a lot of energy in our lives toward decided detachment, disengagement, and disenfranchisement. Sometimes these decisions are very much justified -- for our safety, our self preservation, our self care. But other times, our distance is decided by our determination not to change. Our resistance to intimacy. Our rejection of those persons that might actually expose who we truly are, just as the failing to help on the part of the priest and the Levite exposes their failure to follow God’s law.

David Lose points out that at the end of the story, there is a subtle shift. Jesus doesn’t ask the lawyer who was the Samaritan’s neighbor, rather, he asks who acted like a neighbor. Now, at this point, the one who acted like the neighbor, the Samaritan, isn’t the one in need. He is the one who provides for the one who actually is in need. As

noted earlier, we spend much of our time, energy and money trying to be invulnerable, trying precisely to need as little as possible from those around us. Perhaps it's a fear of being a burden, or owing others, but many of us are terrified of showing vulnerability and this deprives others of the opportunity to express love for their neighbor. It seems ironic to me, but accepting help from your neighbor is an act of loving your neighbor on your part.

As I write this, at the forefront of my thoughts is the plight of the children of asylum seekers on our southern border. As a teacher for 38 years and a member of a group mandated by law to monitor the welfare of the children in my care for ANY signs of abuse, I find the images and reports of the conditions to which these children are subjected to be deeply disturbing. I can't bind their wounds. I can't place them on my animal. I can't pay for their keep at an inn. I can contact Second Congressional District Representative Bill Huizenga, and U.S. Senators Peters and Stabenow and voice my concern over this. It doesn't seem like much, but if there are enough people who feel as I do, together, we just might achieve the political critical mass necessary to move the elected officials to provide relief to those children. In this case, it is the closest that I can come to respond to the command, "Go and do likewise."