

**Message – Cincinnati Friends Meeting
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The Good Samaritan, Again

by Donne Hayden

Among the parables of Jesus, the most widely known and most often referred to is probably the parable of the Good Samaritan. The story is embedded in the Gospel of Luke in another story, a “frame” story, in which Jesus is being questioned by a “certain scribe,” evidently an expert in the “Law” (in some translations, he is referred to as a “lawyer”). In ancient Israel, the scribe would have interpreted the “laws” of the Torah, the first five books of our Old Testament, which included rules governing the behavior of the Hebrew people, among them the Ten Commandments. In Deuteronomy, just after God gives Moses the stone tablets on which are written the commandments, He instructs Moses to tell the Israelites what is known as “the greatest commandment”:

Now this is the commandment . . . that the LORD your God charged me to teach you . . . Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. (Deut. 6:1-5)

Also, in the book of Leviticus, among the many rules and laws, we find in Chapter 19, verses 17-18: *“You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin. . . . You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”*

Back to the parable that Jesus told. The lawyer asks Jesus which is the most important commandment in the Torah, and Jesus responds by asking, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” The man is, after all, a lawyer, so he should know what is written there, and of course, he does. The lawyer answers that the Torah—the source of Jewish law—says that the greatest commandment is: “You must love the Lord your God with your whole heart, with your whole soul, with your whole strength and with your whole mind,” (Roswell C. Long, page 12) and

also love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus replies that this is, indeed, the greatest commandment. The writer of Luke's gospel then uses the parable as Jesus' answer to the lawyer's *next* question, "But who is my neighbor?"

When I think about it, it seems odd to ask Jesus (who was, after all, a good Jewish boy) what the greatest commandment is. Surely there was not a Jew living who did not know the Torah and the "greatest commandment." The other two synoptic gospels, Mark and Matthew, also include a reference to "the greatest commandment," but in different contexts. Perhaps all the early gospel writers were conscious of addressing a non-Jewish audience who would not know what the greatest commandment was.

Back to the parable. I am pretty sure most of you know the story, which is introduced by the scribe asking Jesus the question, "*Who is my neighbor?*" This question and the framework around the parable are probably creations of the author of Luke, but scholars identify the following as most likely to be the original version Jesus himself told.

There was a man going from Jerusalem down to Jericho when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him, beat him up, and went off, leaving him half dead. Now by coincidence a priest was going down that road; when he caught sight of him, he went out of his way to avoid him. In the same way, when a Levite came to the place, he took one look at him and crossed the road to avoid him. But this Samaritan who was traveling that way came to where he was and was moved to pity at the sight of him. He went up to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring olive oil and wine on them. He hoisted him onto his own animal, brought him to an inn, and looked after him. The next day he took out two silver coins, which he gave to the innkeeper, and said, "Look after him, and on my way back I'll reimburse you for any extra expense you have had."¹

¹Luke 10:30-35, Jesus Seminar Translation from *The Five Gospels: What Did Jesus Really Say?*

Using the parable in response to this question makes more sense in the original Greek. The Greek word *plēsion*, translated into English as “neighbor,” has the sense of “friend” or “fellow human being.” For the Jews, “*Plēsion*” referred to “any other person, and where two are concerned, the other” [as in “thy fellow man”] and particularly “any member of the Hebrew nation and commonwealth.” According to Jesus, however, who was a Jew, “*plēsion*” was “any other person irrespective of nation or religion with whom we live or whom we chance to meet” (*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* by Joseph Henry Thayer). So when the scribe used the phrase “love others as you love yourself,” he intended it as Jewish law did—the “others” were naturally those nearby, those of his own country and culture, friends. The writer of Luke’s Gospel uses Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan to make the point that loving “others” as ourselves refers to our enemies as well as our friends.

Most of you have probably heard enough sermons on this parable to know that a longstanding hostility existed between the Israelites, the Jews to whom Jesus would have been talking, and the Samaritans, a neighboring tribe. The two tribes worshipped the same God, but disputed the *place* where God was to be worshipped. The Israelite version of the Torah specified Jerusalem; the Samaritan version claimed God should be worshipped on Mount Gerizim. (Today, by the way, about 500 Samaritans live near the West Bank town of Nablus at the foot of Mount Gerizim.) The point is that, in Jesus’ time, to his listeners, Samaritans were considered foreigners, and not friendly ones.

This parable is one of the best examples of the way Jesus’ stories upset his listeners’ expectations. In a culture based on strict hierarchies, the words “priest” and “Levite” would usually be followed by the word “Israelite.” Here is a scrap of *Mishnah* (commentary on the Hebrew Bible) that lays out the hierarchy very clearly:

A priest takes precedence over a Levite, a Levite over an Israelite, an Israelite [a legitimate birthright Jew] over a mamzer [bastard], a mamzer over a Netin [Temple slave], a

Netin over a proselyte [a recent convert to Judaism], a proselyte over a freed slave. (Mishnah HORAYOT, 3:8, Re-Imagine the World, page 60)

So “priest, Levite, and Israelite” would be the equivalent in English of saying “priest, deacon and layman.” In the parable of the Good Samaritan, by mentioning “priest” and “Levite,” Jesus sets up an expectation in his listeners that the next person to come along will be an Israelite. First a priest comes down the road and “passes by on the other side” from where the wounded man lies “half dead.” (It is significant in the story that the man has been “stripped,” since one’s clothing indicated rank and social status; without his clothing, he could be anyone, perhaps just a slave.) Not only does this top-of-the-social-and-religious-hierarchy not stop to help the wounded man, but the priest actually moves to the other side of the road. The same thing happens with the Levite, a representative of the second rank of authority and prestige. He also crosses the road to avoid the wounded man and passes by. Both the priest and the Levite were required by Jewish law to avoid contamination from touching a dead body, so this may have played a role in the extent to which they avoided contact with the man in the ditch—they didn’t know if he were dead or not.

Next to come along is not the anticipated Israelite, however, but a *Samaritan*. For Jesus’ listeners—those who were hearing the story for the first time and who knew that Samaritans and Jews hated each other, the story took a surprising twist here, and their expectations were completely upset.

Mention of a Samaritan set up another expectation of what would happen in the story. The wounded man is really in trouble now—he is alone in a deserted stretch of road, half-dead and extremely vulnerable to his enemy. And what do we expect of enemies? Certainly not compassion. To those who heard the story for the *first* time, the Samaritan’s actions of caring for a man who might be from an enemy tribe were unexpected and shocking. “*This parable expands our geographical frontiers and makes the words ‘neighborhood’ and ‘neighborliness’ consist*

not in contiguity of residence, but in opportunity; not in geographical location, but in answered human need, sacrifice, hospitality, [and] humanity...”²

Let’s keep that comment in mind, as we consider the story of Marcus Luttrell, a U.S. Navy SEAL. In his book, *Lone Survivor*, Luttrell recounts details of his military training (which began in his Texas childhood) and of the events that occurred in late June-early July 2005 in Afghanistan. I’m taking this summary from the dust jacket of the book, published in 2007:

On a clear night in late June 2005, four U.S. Navy SEALs left their base in northern Afghanistan for the mountainous Pakistani border. Their mission was to capture or kill a notorious al Qaeda leader known to be ensconced in a Taliban stronghold surrounded by a small but heavily armed force. Less than twenty-four hours later, only one of those Navy SEALs remained alive.

This is the story of team leader Marcus Luttrell, the sole survivor of Operation Redwing, and the desperate battle in the mountains that led ultimately, to the largest loss of life in Navy SEAL history. But it is also, more than anything the story of his teammates, who fought ferociously beside him until he was the last one left—blasted unconscious by a rocket grenade, blown over a cliff, but still armed and still breathing. Over the next four days, badly injured and presumed dead, Luttrell fought off six al Qaeda assassins who were sent to finish him, then crawled for seven miles through the mountains before he was taken in by a Pashtun tribe, who risked everything to protect him from the encircling Taliban killers.

No mention of the Good Samaritan . . . But to me the book is a stunning contemporary version of the message in that parable.

While I acknowledge the heroism, determination, courage, and stamina of Luttrell and others who trained and served with him, what *most* impressed me was what happened when the

² Roswell C. Long, Introduction, *Stewardship Parables of Jesus* (Nashville: Cokesbury Press, 1931).

young man found himself stripped (his clothing literally blown off him), wounded and alone among his enemies in the high mountains of Afghanistan. After crawling for seven miles and evading the Taliban, Luttrell passed out briefly and awoke to find himself surrounded by a group of armed Afghans. When he roused up enough to begin to shoot—something, he said, *something* stopped him. The men kept their distance, calling and motioning to him until he finally understood they would not hurt him. When he calmed down and lowered his rifle, they helped him up and took him back to their village. For weeks, they fed and tended the wounds of this American soldier whose army continued to drop bombs near their village. And when local Taliban leaders returned again and again to the village demanding him, the villagers refused to give him up. Finally, Gulab, one of the village elders, walked miles over steep mountain ranges to the nearest U.S. military base to let them know the young American soldier was in their village.

What I found most disturbing about this wonderful story, however, is that Marcus Luttrell was flown home, given the best medical care, and awarded medals for bravery. Gulab, the “enemy” who helped him, however, could not leave the American military base. He might never be able to return to his village, he might never see his wife and six children again—even if he got back to the village, they might be killed by the Taliban or blown up in an American bombing raid.

Once Luttrell leaves Afghanistan, he never again in his narrative mentions Gulab and the other villagers, never mentions feeling responsible for the suffering his life may have brought to these simple people who saved it. Apparently Luttrell does not recognize that the Pashtun villagers, like the Samaritan in the parable, were moved by mercy to help a wounded stranger whom they knew for certain to be an enemy. He does not recognize himself as the man lying in the ditch. Luttrell describes his childhood as patriotic, but “non-religious,” so perhaps he doesn’t know the parable (and apparently, neither does whoever wrote the blurb for the book’s dust jacket).

But to me, this story clearly illustrates the contemporaneity of Jesus' teachings; he said, "Love your enemies" and "Love your neighbor as yourself," with the understanding that "neighbor" includes even those who consider themselves our enemies. The same situations keep recurring in human relationships no matter the time or place, and humanity still has not mastered the lessons Jesus taught two thousand years ago, not even those who call themselves "Christian."

Of the two men in Marcus Lutrell's story, which one most clearly demonstrates what we understand as "Christian" behavior? I see the young soldier from a Christian nation as the man lying in the ditch, while the "heathen" Muslim villagers follow the teachings of Jesus and act as "good Samaritans." Some of us consider following the *teachings* of Jesus more powerful, more significant, than jumping through doctrinal hoops to earn the label "Christian."