

PROPER 10 C

Luke 10:30-37

The Good Samaritan

Most likely, for more years than we'd like to count,
we've heard this gospel that we now call **the Good Samaritan**.

But we have always listened to it, or read it,
in terms of stereotypes, the stereotypes being,
that there are three bad guys – the lawyer, the priest,
and the Levite. And there's one good guy, the Samaritan.

Perhaps it's time to rescue this gospel from that stereotyping
because as a matter of fact, it really has something different to say,
and is much more contemporary than we'd like to think,
because basically, it's dealing with ethical and moral issues.

Let's start with the **lawyer**, who is a good guy.

He is not trying to entrap Jesus,
nor is he trying to make a fool of him.

What he's doing was standard fare of that day.

Jesus was an itinerant rabbi.

As in the universities, the people would come up,

particularly the lawyers, and they would pose questions,
which was a part of the academic setting.

Then they would all sit down

and they would bounce the questions and the answers around,
tapping the mind of the master to see what he would say.

Much the same as they do in law schools today.

So, the lawyer was not being sneaky, nor was he being evil;

he was simply asking a standard question. And in response,

therefore, Jesus gives an answer,

but he tosses the answer back to his audience,

like a good teacher,

and says basically, when you think of it,

“We have some ethical and moral issues here

that are not that clear, so let’s think about them.”

And then he tells them the story of the man going from

Jerusalem to Jericho; he was robbed, beaten,

most of his clothes were taken, and he was left for dead.

The first one to come down the road was the **priest**.

But the **priest** is a good guy, not as we're used to thinking of him;
he isn't some insensitive clod. You have to look at the issues here.

You have to remember that in those days
the priest was charged with ministering to the people
and offering the sacrifices in the temple.

It was something that the whole community expected of him.

More than that, in those days the priest was Social Security
and Welfare and Medicaid all wrapped up in one person.

He was the one who was the conduit for charities
and care for people. People depended upon him.

Now there were certain things that would prevent him
from doing his jobs,
which the people needed him to perform.

And one of those things, according to law,
was not to come within thirty steps of the dead.

If he did that, or touched a dead body,
he was made ritually unclean,

and then he could not perform the prayers at the temple,
and he was disqualified, for a good period of time, from his work.

When you understand that, it puts the priest in a different light;

he is no longer an insensitive clod.

But there's a man lying there; he's dead as far as the priest can tell.

He can't tell whether it's a fellow Jew

because most of the man's clothes have been taken.

If it were a **non-Jew** he wouldn't even think of going near him

or wasting time on him, because to the Jews of that time

a neighbor was only another Jew.

He was faced here with an ethical, moral question:

***"If I go over and just with my foot turn the body over
just to make certain he's dead, and I become ritually unclean,
then what good am I to the rest of my people?
I can't help them, I can't service them.
So many people will be hurt, or certainly disenfranchised,
if I touch this body, the man's dead anyway.
What more could I do?"***

The chances are very good that 100 percent of the audience

who was listening to the story agreed with, the priest's decision.

It was very eminently sensible.

Why should he jeopardize so many people
by touching a dead body which he could not help anyway?

But Jesus comes along in this discussion,
and he opens the door to the possibility
that the priest made a wrong ethical decision.

Jesus suggests that the priest made a good decision,
but that there was a better one.

Jesus raises the possibility
that although the priest would be legally unclean,
and there were honest-to-goodness legal issues here
that the priest had to consider,
still, there were other elements of the situation
that had to be taken into account.

Jesus offered **compassion and love** as factors that might bear upon
the priest's decision and his moral quandary.

So, what you have here is a good man who is following the rules,
and Jesus comes along and says,

“There may be other ways to measure your conduct.”

This is a very contemporary situation. For example,
 doing business today can put unbearable pressures upon people.
 The result is that often they're forced to act in ways
 that are inhuman and hurtful to others in order to close the deal,
 in order to close the contract,
 in order to make “X” number of dollars,
 in order to meet the deadlines,
 and for a host of other reasons.

People are often sacrificed.

That is to say that people in our own society are treated as objects,
 or things, or pawns – and it's good business.

But Jesus raises the ethical question:

***“But are good business and sensibleness
 the only measurements?”***

To be compassionate often doesn't make good economic sense.

But that's the way love is. Love often doesn't make sense.

The priest's dilemma is our dilemma every day, isn't it?

Faced with a decision that will be good for business

but bad for human beings, we say,

“Well, this is the sensible thing to do.

If I don’t do this, then people will lose their jobs,

or the plant will lose money, people will be unemployed,

so, I kind of have to look the other way.”

You see, it’s a moral dilemma.

And the story is saying,

“But Christians should have another measurement

besides common sense. It should be compassion.”

Next, we have another good guy, the **Levite**.

He comes down the road shortly after. He wasn’t a priest.

He was more like a deacon, or vestry person or Senior Warden.

He knew that the priest had gone ahead of him

because in those days the roads were so dangerous

they knew which roads were traveled,

and in small villages like that,

he knew the priest had just preceded him from the temple,

maybe by half an hour.

So, he comes along, and he sees the man

who was apparently dead, and he thinks of himself, rightly,

“Well, the priest went by and he didn’t do anything,

he didn’t think it was necessary to stop.

And the priest is the priest, and he knows more than I do,

he’s the boss. Why should I stop?”

Which is very good sense.

But you sense another contemporary problem, don’t you?

The Levite did not have authority. He deferred to the man who did.

His tactic was to go along with someone else’s judgment.

If the person in authority over you makes a decision,

then you just follow orders. What could be more reasonable?

But Jesus comes along and says, ***“If you and I as Christians***

continue to use that excuse, then we’ll continue to have events

like My Lai (soldiers who shot civilians

‘because ‘I was just following orders.’”)

You will continue to have people use excuses that say,

“Hey, I’m looking the other way, but I’m not in charge.”

If they’re doing these horrible, despicable things at the national level

and raking off billions of dollars from the poor,

and that comes from the top and my boss knows about it,
then who am I to open my mouth?

You know the story. If you're a whistle-blower,
you are very liable to lose your job.

This is the moral stance, isn't it?

"That's not my department. I'm not in charge.

***I mean something wrong's going on in this plant,
in this factory, in this profession.***

***There are some bad, evil decisions being made,
but, you know, I'm only following orders.***

Don't blame me."

That was Eichmann's plea at the Nurenburg trials.

And Jesus says, ***"That's not good enough. Not good enough.***

That's not good enough."

You see what's wrapped up in this story?

It's not an evil Levite;

It's a good Levite, who very sensibly said,

"If my boss didn't bother, why should I?"

But Jesus says,

“There’s got to be a better measurement than that.”

Finally, we have the **Samaritan**. Well, he identified, I guess, with the body there because that was, figuratively, himself.

He was an outcast. He was in a segregated society.

He could touch the body fifty times – he’d be no worse off.

The Jews hate him, considered him unclean.

And whether he helped or not wouldn’t change his status one bit with the Jews.

They thought the Samaritans were wretched people anyway.

So, mentioning that, Jesus brings up the whole issue of prejudice.

And the audience would squirm at that.

Anyway, Jesus comes back to the question.

“Now, who was neighbor to the one who was robbed?”

The lawyer’s reluctant admission is it must be the Samaritan, but his legal mind says the priest and the Levite were right.

And Jesus has to concur. As far as they went, they were right.

But what Jesus proposes is that we have to go farther.

That’s what’s in this gospel.

It's a gospel about ethics and morals.

It's a gospel that says that compassion comes over the rule,
and love is over the law, and integrity is over authority.

And to live that way is to live a profoundly Christ-like life.

Be ready to take the consequences of that.

Most of us accommodate, don't we?

And most of us excuse our behavior because ***"That's not my job."***

And most of us turn the other way

Because ***"that's not my responsibility."***

And most of us plead good common sense, like the priest.

And there's a lot of merit to that.

But the radicalness of the gospel says

that we don't, or should not, live like other people.

It's a beautiful and costly thing to be a Christian.

And if you were the priest, as good as he was, he followed the rules,

You should have, in this instance, said,

"The heck with the rules," and showed compassion.

And if you were the Levite, good man that he was,

you should not hide behind the excuse that

“the boss didn’t do anything,

so, I guess I don’t have to do anything either.”

Jesus says, ***“You have to jeopardize something to be a disciple.”***

So, the next time you hear the story of the Good Samaritan,
listen with new ears.

Not with the old stereotypes of two lousy bums
and one noble character. No, that gets us off the hook.

We are talking about two fine, outstanding, honest people –
three, including the lawyer.

But all of them are being challenged by Jesus to go beyond the law,
to go beyond the excuse, to go beyond the authority;
and to come down to that love
which expresses itself in compassion,
and invites all of us to be Good Samaritans.

May it be so, for all of us! Amen.