

## **FOLLOWING JESUS: SAVED FOR WHAT?**

Luke 10:25-37

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Eleven days ago, a severe thunderstorm rolled through our area. Tree limbs came crashing down. Basements flooded. People lost power, some for days. And I noticed one other result: tempers were even shorter than usual. I heard stories of frustrated people calling the electric company and screaming into the phone. Some people thanked the workers who were on the job long hours restoring power and those cleaning up the debris, but others were impatient and rude. One friend observed the behavior she saw around her that week and said to me, "I just don't understand why people have become so mean."

When people are angry, they want to let off steam. When things aren't going well, it's so tempting to look for someone to blame. Lash out. Call someone names.

I try extra hard to be more aware of the good than the bad in the world, because the good doesn't make headlines very often, but even I have noticed recently that people have seemed more tense. I have observed people being quick to make assumptions about others, jumping to conclusions. Then I stop and reflect on my own habits. If I'm seeing

negativity in others, maybe I should look in the mirror. Am I being empathetic? Am I genuinely interested in what other people's life situations are like, or do I assume I know what someone else is thinking and feeling?

At the end of last year, I read an article from a ministry journal, encouraging all Christian leaders (that's all of us!) to be sensitive to what a difficult time it is in which we are living. The first sentence in the article gave this advice: "This is a season to be very gentle with one another." The article went on to say that many people are barely holding on. We are encouraged to do everything with grace and good spirit and consideration for others.

I am reminded of the quote that has been attributed to various people: "Be kind. Everyone you meet is fighting a battle you know nothing about."

This four-week sermon series is entitled, "Following Jesus." I began, two weeks ago, by talking about Jesus' gift of seeing people whom everyone else ignored, loving the people everyone else tried hard to avoid. If we are to follow Jesus, we will try to see one another in the same way. Last week, we talked about the importance Jesus placed on showing forth God's love in the present time and place, a way of life that saves us from meaninglessness and despair. The word, "salvation" means wholeness

and healing. It is an important word in the Christian life. We rejoice in our salvation, in the gifts of grace and forgiveness and unconditional love. And from that state of joy and gratitude, we want to give back. We want to follow in the footsteps of Jesus by living as he lived. We are saved for lives of meaning and purpose, but what exactly does that mean? I've titled today's sermon, "Saved for What?"

That question is almost identical to the one asked in our gospel reading for today:

A legal expert asks Jesus, "What must I do to gain eternal life?" Jesus, here in his role as rabbi - consummate teacher - does what good teachers do. He asks the student to probe his own heart and mind more deeply. He says, "You know the law. What does the law say?" The student quotes from Jewish law, "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself."

Jesus says, "Yes!"

In other words, "Go do it. Those are your marching orders. What more do you need to know? Love God, love your neighbor, love yourself...it's really an agenda for a lifetime."

There is a pause in the conversation next, though. The man is thinking..."wait a minute...I don't want to love everyone. Surely Jesus doesn't mean I have to love EVERYONE. Who is NOT my neighbor? Who doesn't deserve my love? Who can I ignore? Whose needs can I not worry about?" This is what the man is asking when he says, "Who is my neighbor?" It's a polite way of saying, "Who is excluded, Jesus? Who can I be mean to? Who is outside the scope of my empathy and compassion? There must be someone I can vent about, someone I can blame."

To answer this man's question, Jesus tells a story. We know it as the parable of the Good Samaritan. When we first learn it, as children, we learn it as a story about being nice. You know how the story goes. A man is walking from Jerusalem to Jericho. He is beaten and robbed and left on the side of the road. He is left there to die, and he's wondering, "Who will help me?" One person comes near, but crosses the street. He chooses not to become involved. And then it happens a second time. "Not my problem." Imagine the despair of the man who has first been the victim of crime and now is a victim of apathy and indifference. He hears footsteps again and doesn't even dare to feel much hope, but this time the steps come near, they slow and they stop. The third person to be on the road, a man from Samaria, is moved with compassion. He bandages the victim's

wounds, places the wounded man on his own donkey, takes him to an inn, pays for his care, and promises to come back to check on him.

We teach this story to our children because it has a simple, understandable lesson. This is what it means to be nice. It means caring about other people, even when it's inconvenient, even when it costs us some of our time, some of our money. Even when it's messy. We don't leave people on the side of the road. We care for them.

It's a beautiful and important lesson, and we marvel at Jesus' ability to tell a memorable story. Yet there is another layer to this story.

Jesus tells a story to his Jewish community and the hero of the story is a Samaritan, a bitter enemy of the Jews. Jews and Samaritans disagreed about everything that mattered: how to honor God, how to interpret the Scriptures, and where to worship. They practiced their faith in separate temples, read different versions of the Torah, and avoided social contact with each other whenever possible. Jesus' choice to make a Samaritan the hero of this story would have been shocking to first century Jewish ears.

How do we translate this parable into categories that make sense for us? What would be the modern equivalent of a Jewish person hearing that a Samaritan did something good? One writer has tried...see if any of these

examples make sense for you: “An Israeli Jewish man is robbed, and a Good Hamas member saves his life. A liberal Democrat is robbed, and a Good conservative Republican saves her life. A white supremacist is robbed, and a Good black teenager saves his life. A transgender woman is robbed, and a Good anti-LGBTQ activist saves her life. An atheist is robbed, and a Good Christian fundamentalist saves his life.”\* Those examples hint at how radical this parable was when it was first told...it’s very hard for us to hear it that way today.

Jesus offers this story and then he comes back to the legal expert...”Who was a neighbor to the man who was the victim of thieves?” And the legal expert takes a deep breath, realizing the kind of life to which Jesus calls us, and says, “The one who showed compassion.”

Jesus says, “Go and do likewise.” Go, and show neighborly love...to everyone. There is no one outside the scope of God’s love and care. And so we are all neighbors.

This is the life for which we are saved and to which we are called: a life of neighborly love. Neighborliness is a theme throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. The way to show that we love God is by loving the people God loves - especially those who are most vulnerable: the widow, the orphan,

the stranger, the immigrant, the ones without another safety net, the ones discriminated against, the ones everyone else ignores.

It's relatively easy to show neighborly love and care to those who are like us, to those who might reciprocate for us. But showing neighborly compassion towards those we don't like? Those with whom we disagree?

In these tense times, when we are feeling fearful and anxious about so many things, it's tempting for us to allow our most base instincts to rule our behavior. Our reptilian brain is that primal part of our brain that kicks in when we are fighting for survival. When we're worried about self-preservation, we gravitate towards things that are familiar, we resist change, and we're suspicious of anything unfamiliar.

When we allow that part of our brain to dominate our lives, we find it comforting to lash out at other people, make fun of other ideas; we find it satisfying to throw potshots and be mean to one another.

But we're here today because we know that we are called to live differently. We're called to use the wisdom and maturity God has given us, to "put an end to childish things," as Paul puts it in his letter to the Corinthians. We are called to live with moral courage. In this complex and interconnected world, we will all rise together or we will all suffer together. Our differences are important, and we need to continue to practice

speaking the truth in love and listening to one another with open minds and hearts, never assuming we know another person's story. Neighborly love includes remembering that there is good and bad in each of us, and that most people are trying their best.

You might not see anyone on the side of the road this week, but I'll bet you'll encounter someone who needs a word of encouragement. There will be some cause tugging at your heart that could benefit from your donation or involvement. There will be someone you can thank, and you never know how much your words of genuine gratitude would mean. Have we expressed our appreciation to those who show neighborliness in our communities? From health care workers to first responders, from social workers to beleaguered restaurant employees?

The problems of the world seem overwhelming but they do not need to paralyze us. We are called to neighborly compassion, and there is no act too small or too insignificant. We can bemoan the epidemic of meanness or we can just set a different example, and begin the ripples of kindness, excluding no one...and trusting that they will lead us towards a better world.

Let us pray. Holy God, we thank you for your word which is still speaking to us today, nudging us towards lives of neighborly love. We

thank you for the example set by Jesus, who embodied a spirit of compassion and inclusion. Open our hearts and minds so that we might follow him, in whose name we pray. Amen.

\*<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/1023-go-and-do-likewise>