

Bible scholars suggest that a preacher will have a difficult time finding anything new to say about the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Despite its roots in the Talmud-like teaching of Jesus, this story has found its way into the popular culture. Almost everyone – religious or secular – knows that to be a Good Samaritan is to help someone in need. There are even “Good Samaritan Laws” enacted to prevent being sued if you stop to help an ailing person.

If the entire congregation knows this story by heart, and if the entire culture knows that it is honourable to be a Good Samaritan, how foolish of me to think that I could discover a new piece of wisdom for us this morning? So why bother with this passage at all?

As you know we have been on a three Sunday exploration of Jesus’ instruction to love – to love God, neighbour and self. In our first sermon we explored what it meant to love ourselves. In the second we reflected on loving our intimate neighbour – those precious but delicate relationships with close friends and family members. We could have stopped there if it were not for the story of the Good Samaritan. The lawyer in this passage won’t leave things alone and presses Jesus to define ‘neighbour’. Are ‘neighbours’ the people we live with, or the people who live near us, or those who - for all intents and purposes - are part of our tribe? If it wasn’t

for the parable of the Good Samaritan we could have assumed that 'neighbours' were those people who are at least familiar to us. Jesus' response to the lawyer takes the business of loving neighbour into unfamiliar and even dangerous places.

Jesus expands our understanding of neighbour. The story portrays an unknown traveler, presumably a Jew of Jesus' tribe who gets robbed and beaten on a dangerous stretch of road. Two upright people of the community pass by without providing any help. Finally a Samaritan, a member of a different tribe, one who is seen to have second-class status, stops and, as the Bible says, "shows mercy." I presented this parable to the Spiritual Conversations groups over the last week and asked who they most identified with – the Priest and Levite as they hurry by or the Samaritan who stops to provide help.

Your friends are an honest lot – they confessed that they identify with all three. They confessed the fear that makes them pass by the hitchhiker on the highway. They confessed the pressures of life that cause them to not take the time to listen to the garbled speech of a stroke survivor. They confessed the weariness of being solicited too often to give money or time to a worthy cause. And, they acknowledged, that sometimes they live into the risky generosity of the Samaritan - piling five Indigenous hitchhikers into

their vehicle, or willingly buying a meal for the disheveled man outside the Midtown Centre or working tirelessly to establish Station 20 as an oasis of health care and community.

I respect the honesty of your friends. I am like them: probably you are too. We want to be the Samaritan – yet sometimes we are scared, or too busy, or simply don't have the emotional resources – and sometimes our better selves step forward, the God-power actually empowers us and we risk loving the stranger. With the courage of the God-power, and the support of a community such as this, I pray that we will more often than not befriend the homeless, come to the aid of a person in need and advocate for the marginalized.

There is a character in this story who often gets overlooked. It is the man laying beaten and robbed on the road. From a story teller's perspective this character is but the ruse to hold up the example of the Good Samaritan. I invite you for a moment to look through this person's eyes, to look up into the face of a stranger and see someone who is under no compulsion to care, someone who lives a life totally different from your life, someone who - under different circumstances – you might feel uncomfortable around.

I was not yet thirty years old when the church in all its wisdom sent me to Balcarres, Saskatchewan where I was to minister to eleven little communities including four First Nations – Peepeksis, Okanese, Little Black Bear and Star Blanket. I tended to these people filled with the fears and prejudices of my childhood and with little appreciation for the oppression they had experienced. They were gracious, even demurring, in their attitude toward me. They welcomed me into their homes and gave me tea. One winter night I was travelling the highway between Duff on the far end of the parish and Balcarres where my house was when the lights of my car dimmed, the engine lost power and I drifted to the side of the highway. I concluded that my alternator was shot and that the car would have to be towed. It was the era before cell phones and so I stepped out on to the highway and stuck out my thumb. Car after car whizzed by, their wind currents enhancing the cold. After only ten minutes I was beginning to feel desperate when, what looked like a converted school bus, pulled over to the side of the road. The door opened and the driver asked if I needed a ride. I crawled inside with the local aboriginal hockey team who ferried me home. I was cared for by the Good Samaritan.

It was decades later before I had another significant contact with an Indigenous person. This time it was the elder I hired as the first Indigenous

staff person in the health region's Department of Spiritual Care. Once again I was the person needing help and orientation. He welcomed me to his sweat lodge, taught me to collect sage and overlooked the fact that my white religious ancestors had exploited the generosity of his ancestors. I wonder how many settlers, strangers to this land, would have died were it not for the instruction and generosity of Indigenous people. Our ancestors were cared for by Good Samaritans.

My friend Dayle chairs the refugee committee at St. Martin's church. In many ways she 'is' the refugee committee negotiating government bureaucracy, searching out affordable accommodation, and providing transportation to medical appointments for countless refugees over the last decade. She certainly fits the description of a Good Samaritan but when I asked her recently about her experience in light of today's sermon she identified with the victim on the road. Searching for purpose after retirement and needing a diversion from her own health challenges, Dayle found that these new Canadians welcomed her into their lives. Despite being hunted by the Taliban, evicted from refugee quarters by unscrupulous governments and subject to racist attitudes in Canada they welcomed Dayle into their lives. They made her a friend, dubbed her the honorary grandmother of the family, and revealed a resilient spirit that

helped Dayle put her life in perspective. Dayle believes that she was helped up from the road of anomie by these Good Samaritans.

As we all know, the 'higher calling' is to be the Good Samaritan - to risk, to care, to act. Perhaps to truly understand the Good Samaritan we first have to be the one lying in need on life's roadside. It is when the one we least expect offers to tend to our wounds, whether those wounds be physical, wounds of inherited prejudice, or the woundedness of living without purpose – it is when the one we least expect tends to our wounds that we understand God, God the Verb.

If I've learned nothing else in this series on "loving like Jesus in a fractured world" it is that love is a relational event. We need allies in confronting the self-defeating messages that we tell ourselves; we need to see our intimate neighbours as allies in our common quest for meaningful relationships; and we need strangers to rescue us from visions too domestic to forge a meaningful life. God is not in the heavens or in the prayer books, the God who is love is met, received and enacted in the midst of the lives we live. At the end of Jesus' parable the lawyer concludes that the neighbour is the one who shows love. And Jesus responds across the centuries, "Go and do likewise."