



## Broken Nation

Luke 10:30-37

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While you may be among the list, it doesn't take a political science major, or a psychologist, or a sociologist, or an economist, or a Federal agent, or someone with top secret clearance, or someone who works in a secured government agency building to know things are pretty screwed up in our country right now. It doesn't even take reading the newspaper, or watching the news on TV, or getting updates on your phone, or surfing the internet to know how divided our country is into clans of people. It doesn't take a great deal of intellect, nor anything more than marginal awareness, to sense and feel the tension that is palpable in our nation.

We have regular and on-going arguments on the local and national level in just about every facet of life. I mean, I could spark a day-long yelling match just by claiming the Atlanta Braves will win the National League East this year.

But seriously, could we have a longer list of ongoing arguments in our nation? We have disagreements on issues ranging from athletic team names, to climate change, to school choice, to gun control, to marriage, to immigration, to religious beliefs, to taxation, to health care, to racial equality, to land control, to government-run surveillance, to military spending, to the gender pay gap, to reproductive rights, to gerrymandering political districts ... do I keep going? ... For some of these topics, if not for most of them, we have deep-rooted thoughts and beliefs of what is right and what is wrong.

I'm not interested in getting into the debate at this time whether or not there is a right or wrong opinion on any of these topics. And if you're wondering, of course I think there's a right and wrong opinion on most of these topics. I think having an opinion is a good thing, when the opinion is well informed. Just as you, I've allowed my understanding of the Biblical witness, my experience working with others, the traditions of my family and the history of the church, and my own educated and rational mind to inform what I believe to be right or wrong. But at the core of all of these issues, what I firmly believe is that disagreement is what helps us make the right choice moving forward. It takes a variety of ideas, understandings, experiences, and beliefs to help us find the best way to move forward. Much like who we are as a church, for us to live into authentic community as a nation, we need the breadth of gifts, passions, and ideas to work in harmony to guide the future direction of the whole.

I don't think we are broken as a nation because *we disagree* on the way forward in any of these varying areas of life. I don't think we are broken as a nation because we don't always agree on what's best as we look to the future. Our brokenness is not exemplified in our diversity of *thought*, any more than because we are diverse in demographics. No, our brokenness in America is not the result of *being* different; instead, I believe our brokenness as a nation stems from our reaction to the existing diversity. We have decided that our diversity is sufficient for telling those who differ from us they are unworthy of being our equal, and as such, they do not deserve to have their opinions heard or acted upon. Our brokenness manifests itself not in the

fact that we have a difference of opinion, but is exhibited in the way we write others off as being less important than us – in the way we say the lives of others are less important than our lives – in the way we say the well-being of others is less important than our well-being. We have, in effect, aligned ourselves with the glory of God, and claimed that we, and we alone, are God's chosen – whether as individuals, small or large sects or people. We do this time and time again, in whatever argument the day, moment, or situation calls for. Therein lies the root of our brokenness – we have put ourselves in the place of God, relegating all others, their thoughts, and their needs as less important than our own.

So this morning we turn to the Biblical story for guidance amidst our brokenness, because we know that God is the business of reconciliation – God is active in our lives, working toward the healing of our brokenness. For guidance on how to heal our broken nation, we turn to the story that is titled, *The parable of the good Samaritan*.

Before we get into the parable itself to see God's call to faithfulness, it's interesting noting the human bias in the story's title. This story is given the header, "The parable of the *Good Samaritan*." To be clear, the original Greek manuscripts of the Bible text did not have section headers – in fact, the original texts didn't have chapter or verse numbering either. It wasn't until the 13<sup>th</sup> century that the text was divided into chapters as we see it today, and it was another couple hundred years before the verse divisions came to be. The headers, though varying across different translations, weren't added until much more recently. These are not original titles.

This is an odd title, because nowhere in the story does Jesus refer to the Samaritan as 'good.' The header seems to show a bias against Samaritans at large. It seems as if it was important for the printing companies to clarify this was not a 'bad' Samaritan. As if to say, what you're about to read is a rare and shocking example of a story of a 'good' Samaritan. Were there to be no bias against Samaritans, perhaps one would have titled this story, "The parable of the neighborly Samaritan." Or, if the writers were more biased against the institution of the Jewish leaders, it would be titled, "The parable of the bad priest," or, "The parable of the unfaithful Levite," or perhaps with no bias at all, "The parable of Christ-like road-side assistance." But no, the title highlights how broken we are. The Christian printing companies, who share the lineage of the priest and Levite among the educated leaders in the faith, still have an ax to grind against the Samaritans, and thus note for us, "Here is a rare story of a Samaritan who was good."

You know how the story goes – a man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho. The offers for us a few important details in and of itself. First, the man was traveling downward. Jerusalem is located about 2,500 feet above sea level. Jericho, located just on the north end of the Dead Sea, is actually 850 feet *below* sea level. So the man was physically heading down to Jericho, walking down a relatively steep 3300 foot decline, which spans only a 15-mile distance. In such a trek, the fear of mugging was increased, because there were many places where robbers could hide behind switch backs and rock cliffs along the steep walking path.

Jesus doesn't make it clear who the man is, why he was travelling, or what he was travelling with. One might assume the man was Jewish, as it would be rare to find someone at that time travelling from Jerusalem to Jericho who didn't have a Jewish background. But Jesus doesn't specify, so we're left to our imagination. Perhaps the man being undefined is better for Jesus'

story. Should it have mattered if he were Jewish or not? Should the man's demographic qualities play a part in the rest of the story? For Jesus, it seems not.

The man is accosted, stripped, beaten, and left for dead.

Along the path come three passersby. The first is a priest. In the first century Jewish life, priests were visible leaders in the Temple life. They performed the daily duties of sacrificial offerings. The priest saw the man, and made the cognitive decision to move to the other side of the road as he passed by.

Some time later, a Levite comes to the place where the man lay. The Levites were a tribe of the Jewish community who traced their lineage back to the tradition of Levi. They had both political and religious responsibilities in the Jewish community. The Levite, just as the priest did, saw the man, and made the intentional decision to move to the other side of the road as he passed by.

If you go out and read about the contextual history of priests and Levites, you'll find a number of speculated reasons why it was these two travelers would have made the intentional decision to pass by on the other side of the road. For example, considering this was a dangerous path to be walking, obvious in the bloodied body on the side of the road, the men could have been fearful for their own safety. It was certainly possible the robbers were hiding just around the corner, waiting for a sympathetic fool to stop and help the man. Their personal safety was at risk in stopping to offer help to the man.

It's also possible that the man who was beaten was not Jewish; remember, Jesus didn't tell us of the man's identity. If he were *not* Jewish, there would be cultural concerns with the Temple leaders touching him. The text tells us the priest and Levite saw him, and then moved to the other side of the road. Did they identify him by his clothing, hairstyle, or facial hair as non-Jewish? Their reputation was at stake in stopping to help the man.

Or, as representative of the Temple leadership, these men would have been restricted by purity regulations. For them to have touched a bloodied or dead man, they would have become ritually unclean. Such an act would have put a stigma of uncleanness on them that would have prohibited them from carrying out their religious duties in the Temple. If they saw him all bloodied, regardless if he were dead or not, they may have moved to the other side of the road to distance themselves from the unclean body for fear of their own status in society. Their occupational purity was at risk in stopping to help the man.

Yet, at the same time, "such purity concerns would be insignificant compared to the weightier need to arrange for the burial of an exposed body."<sup>1</sup> Especially if the man were Jewish, as Temple leaders, they would have been obligated to arrange for his body to be cared for in death.

Such complicated and converging concerns are fun to consider, and can perhaps help us better understand the parable, but nevertheless, they go unnamed by Jesus. Perhaps Jesus doesn't have to speak the concerns aloud because his Jewish audience would have been well aware of the concerns that caused the priest and Levite to pass by. Perhaps Jesus' audience wouldn't have thought twice about the decision of the priest and Levite, because they would have

agreed with the decision of these Temple leaders. In their own social, religious, economic, and cultural expectancies, these two men could have been justified in their actions. But as Jesus continues, it's clear these two men will not be praised for their faithfulness to the law.

So Jesus continues, “*But* a traveling Samaritan came near him ...” If you can remember back to the end of last summer, I told you, “I like God’s butts.” In the midst of our brokenness, in the midst of our darkest seasons, God’s interrupting ‘but ...’ is always a sign of divine healing to come. “*But* a Samaritan, who was travelling, came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’”

The Samaritan community was historically Jewish; they had ties back to the lineage of Israel. However, they rejected the Temple in Jerusalem as the central holy place in the faith. While the Jewish community in Israel claimed Mount Zion in Jerusalem as God’s chosen place of worship, the Samaritan community claimed Mount Gerizim as the central place of worship, a location that is found about 30 miles north of Jerusalem. As with most religious disputes, the two communities did not associate with one another due to their religious differences. You can see a few examples of this conflict in the Biblical text. Like when Jesus encountered the Samaritan woman at the well, claiming to her, “There will come a time when we will worship neither here nor in Jerusalem.” He’s talking about the disputed place of ‘right worship’ – on Mount Gerizim, or on Mount Zion. The disciples were shocked that Jesus, a pious Jewish rabbi, would interact with a Samaritan (not to mention the gender issue – a Samaritan woman).

To the Jewish community, Samaritans were outcasts. They were defectors of the faith. “The Jews held Samaritans in contempt, seeing them as unfaithful to the law of Moses and to the temple worship in Jerusalem.”<sup>ii</sup> As such untouchables, the Samaritans were seen as unclean, and were thus considered to be incapable of being faithful to God.

The Samaritan, like the priest and Levite, had every reason to pass by. He was just at risk of the robbers still being in the area, waiting to claim another victim. And worse, he was in Jewish territory, which meant he was out of place. Had a Jewish leader come around the corner and seen the Samaritan standing over the bloodied man, he very likely could have been accused as the culprit of the beating. Perhaps more so than the priest and Levite, the Samaritan puts himself at greater risk of personal harm in stepping closer to the bloodied man. And more than just his personal harm, he puts his financial wealth on the line. He pours out his oil and wine to help stop the bleeding – not inexpensive commodities. He takes him to an inn and pays for his care. He agrees to come back and settle any additional expenses that might be accrued. He risks his personal well being, expends his financial resources, and he goes out of his way to care for the man. Not only slowing his own journey, but going to the inn and agreeing to come back to the inn, he puts the man’s health and wholeness above his own.

For all the negative stigmas against him, here in the parable, Jesus uses this outcast to be the witness of faithfulness.

In his question at the end, Jesus asks, “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” Jesus wants to know, not, which man saw the beaten man as a neighbor, but which of the three passersby demonstrated *himself* as a faithful neighbor.

The Jewish leader responding to Jesus can’t even come to use the words of Jesus’ parable. He can’t get past himself to say, “It was the Samaritan.” No, he can only muster the words, ‘The one who showed him mercy.’ There such animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans, he couldn’t even give credit to the hypothetical Samaritan by name in response to Jesus.

See, I’m not convinced our differences keep us from living faithfully into God’s will. It’s clear from a Biblical perspective that there is no right race, no right religious perspective, no right gender, and no right area in which one must live and worship. I’m not convinced our brokenness as a nation is due to any religious, cultural, ethnic, racial, gender, political, or intellectual differences. These are the facades we hide behind. Our problem is not that we are different. It’s that we have subsets of people who have decided that their well being is more important than the well being of others. We have decided our jobs are not worth risking for the safety of others. We have decided that our emotional connections to “the way things have always been” is more important than a call to a renewed understanding of faithfulness. We have decided that our we are better off digging in and maintaining things the way they are than to risk our personal, financial, or professional well being for the sake of saving the lives of others – no matter how battered, bloodied, bruised, or close to death the other may be.

But in the story of God’s work – in the story of how God redeems creation – in the story of how God is healing us as a people – “God often shows up where we least expect God to be.”<sup>iii</sup> From a shepherd boy who became king, to a teenage mother who give birth to God’s Son, to a Samaritan traveler who aided a bloodied victim, to a Nazarean child who become the author of salvation ... “That’s what God does: God chooses people no one expects to do amazing things through them.”<sup>iv</sup>

Our nation will not be healed through the removal of differences in demographics or opinion; we will only be healed through the movement of God’s Spirit that, as it moved in the Samaritan, may work in us – you, and me, and each who may pass us by – to see the well-being of others as equal to our own well-being. For we alone were not created in the image of God – but all humanity bears the stamp of the Creator. So may we let God work in us the healing that can restore our broken nation, that we may live as Christ has called us to live, as neighbors who share God’s love and extend God’s healing to all. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit: Lord, come and work in us a new life, all for the glory of God. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Matthew L Skinner. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Year C, Volume 3.* Eds. Barbara Brown Taylor & David L. Bartlett. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010.

<sup>ii</sup> James A. Wallace. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Year C, Volume 3.* Eds. Barbara Brown Taylor & David L. Bartlett. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010.

<sup>iii</sup> David Lose. davidlose.net. Retrieved February 21, 2018.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.