



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR
THE FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, JULY 14, 2019
DEUTERONOMY 30:9-14; PSALM 25:1-9; COLOSSIANS 1:1-14; LUKE 10:25-37

THE SAMARITAN AND OUR SPIRITUAL SURVIVAL



Sometime in my first year here in Seattle, I was walking to church one morning early, and I saw a woman walking toward me on the sidewalk, still about a block away. She did not notice me until we were much closer, and when she looked up and saw my clergy collar, she panicked and crossed the street to the other side. No more eye contact from there.

I chuckled at the encounter, or non-encounter, which has happened a few times since then. Some in the none zone must think the priest is lurking in the neighborhood looking for someone to accost, and force feed them my religious non-sense.

I get the irony of it all, and then I conjure up the image of this parable with the priest and

Levite crossing the road to the other side, and it helps me remember that we all have our moments of panicked wariness or fear, prompting us to avoid the other.

This parable of the good Samaritan is widely known, one of the best known passages of scripture, known well beyond the hallowed halls of churches.

Many want to make it a lesson in morality—do good unto others as you would have them do unto you. Nothing wrong with that, but that's not really what the parable is about. Even the moniker “good Samaritan” is a misnomer. Nowhere in the passage is the Samaritan called “good.” Surely, he was “good” to the victim, but leaving it there misses the deeper truth offered by Jesus in the encounter, which is about the quality and character of neighborliness.

He and the lawyer both know the book of Deuteronomy well, and it would behoove us to begin there also, in the book of Deuteronomy.

It is called Deuteronomy—deutero—because it is a second telling of the story of Exodus. A retelling, which invites retelling the story in every generation to follow—Jesus' generation, even down to ours.

The great Old Testament theologian Walter Brueggemann, whom we've had here twice, and I'd recommend just about anything he's ever written—Brueggemann offers a very helpful dissection of Deuteronomy which he suggests is a retelling of the tension between what he calls “protocols of purity” which exist in every culture across time, and “protocols of neighborliness” into which the book of

Deuteronomy, and by extension Jesus, calls us over and over again.ⁱⁱ

To understand Deuteronomy, we have to begin with the Exodus—you know the story, the Hebrew people were victims of the predatory economic structure of Pharaoh's realm until they are emancipated from that predatory economy and delivered into an alternative one, grounded in abundance, to be seen and celebrated as gifts from God. Manna from heaven, the bread of heaven, is offered as a sign of that abundance, and the Ten Commandments are really just a guide by which the people can administer that abundance for all.

But there are competing views of the world, and the protocols of purity, as Brueggemann calls them, are about stratifying the community into levels of “rightness.” Again, every culture does this, including ours. And people suffer as a result.

The protocols of purity have often taken form to stratify rightness of gender, skin color, sexual orientation, and those not from the region. The protocols are designed to demean people who are considered less pure—women, people of color, gay, lesbian, trans, immigrants. And when the community sanctions ritual demeaning, it inevitably leads to economic exploitation, either explicitly, or through limits on access to education, jobs, housing, and health care. It is a violent way of being in the world.

Surely, we can say that such protocols find application in our society today, and we would do well to reflect on how we serve as accomplices to such a system that inclines to the old ways of pharaoh, and refuses to

believe that a realm of abundance can and does exist.

Deuteronomy names all this in its retelling of the story, and invites us to retell it in our own time and place as well.

But the book doesn't stop there. It devotes even more ink to the protocols of neighborliness, and holds the tension between the two alternative visions of the world.

Before we get to this summarizing passage in the 30th chapter of Deuteronomy, we get a litany of ways to treat our neighbors.

Chapter 23. Do not charge interest on your neighbors. So like the lawyer speaking to Jesus, we must ask "who is my neighbor?"

It goes on to say do not collect collateral on the loans you make to your neighbors. Well, it actually says you can take your neighbor's coat as collateral, but you must return it each night so he can stay warm, then get it again the next morning. He is your neighbor.

Chapter 24: Do not practice wage theft—pay the day worker his pay on the day he worked. He is your neighbor who needs to feed his family.

Chapter 25: do not have two weights and measures for rich and poor. Think pay day loans and the usurious rates they charge to people who can least afford it. They are your neighbor. Don't do that.

And speaking of the poor—when you harvest your grain, or your grapes or your olives, do not gather the gleanings also, but leave them for the widow, the orphan, the foreigner—those who eke out an existence on the lowest

rungs of the economic ladder. They are your neighbor. Share your wealth. Be generous because God is generous.

And here's the most important directive in the whole book, from chapter 15: *Every seventh year you shall grant a remission of debts*, SO THAT there will be no one in need among you. If you live according to the alternative vision that the God of your emancipation has shown you, the abundance will flow to all.

Every seventh year you shall forgive the debts owed by your neighbor...because God your God has ransomed you out of your bondage in Egypt.

Now it's helpful to know that in the Hebrew of the Old Testament there were no adverbs to apply emphasis; they had absolute infinitives instead. So if we were to say give generously, give really generously, they didn't have adverbs like generously or really. Instead they used the absolute infinitive more than once—really give, would have been "give give."

And in this directive about forgiving the debts of your neighbor, Moses or whoever wrote this uses six infinitives to make the point—I really really really really mean this! Six infinitives. More infinitives here than any other place in all the bible.

And Jesus and the lawyer would have known that.

So you can make this parable of the good Samaritan a sweet tale about a kind outsider who took care of the hurt man, and leave it at that. Or you can interpret it as a moral fable to do good, be kind to others, but if you leave

it there you will miss the deeper invitation to abundance and all the ways that the protocols of neighborliness might inform our lives today, and what we as people of biblical faith might have to say to the powers that be that hold fast to the protocols of purity which manifest today as the staggering weight of economic exploitation borne by those with student loans, or subprime usury in the housing market, or compounding legal fines on immigrants, or a purity-driven bail system that has so distorted things that 70% of the people in local jails in this nation have not been convicted of a crime. They just can't raise the money to post bail.

"Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" To which Jesus responds: "What is written in the law?"

The law is clear, folks, when it comes to naming and wrestling with this tension

ⁱ A sketch by Rembrandt van Rijn.

<http://www.stewardshipoflife.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/Rembrandt-good-samaritan-sketch.jpg>

between purity and neighborliness. We must practice abundance because the God of abundance has delivered us out of our bondage into freedom to live in that abundance.

And Jesus is asking us to retell the story here and now, even while he asks us a central question of our spiritual survival: Will we be people of faith who hold fast to a system of stratified purity and its economics of scarcity and violence, or will we be people of faith who work for an alternative vision in which God's abundance flows through us into the world?

Go, he says, and do likewise to your neighbors. Or he might have said: Go, go, go, go, go, go.

ⁱⁱ Much of the exegetical and thematic content of this sermon is drawn from a lecture Brueggemann gave in Nov. 2018 at Xavier University as part of the Neighborhood Economics Conference.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ZtpD304AmI

Luke 10:25-37 [Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling 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.' Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."]