

I have often been asked by church folks if I get worried about talking about non-Christians about faith. My response often surprises them. I would much rather talk to someone who is seeking faith or does not yet know Christ than talk to Christians who think they know all the answers. We need to look no farther than today's scripture passage to see why.

The story of the Good Samaritan is one that perhaps you already know. Countless Bible Studies and Sunday school lessons have been taught on it over the years, as well as numerous sermons preached. But I want to invite you to set aside what you may already know about this story today and explore it with open hearts and open ears.

Let's start back at the beginning of this story - the part that often gets left out. A lawyer came to Jesus and asked him a very specific question - "what must I do to gain eternal life?" Friends, a whole sermon could be preached just on this question. This lawyer, or legal expert as some translations call him, was an expert in scripture - that's what lawyers were back in that day. He was one who would have studied the scripture with meticulous detail, and guess what, he isn't asking this question because he is truly curious or seeking. He is asking this question because he already has an opinion and he wants to justify what he already believes.

What does he already have an opinion on - how to gain eternal life. As modern day Christians we may assume that he is asking how to get to heaven or how to obtain a life after death, but that isn't what he is asking at all. Instead, eternal life, was here and now and it was the fullest, most richly blessed life that you could live.

Do you see now why I dislike talking to Christians who think they know it all, or enter a conversation not with an open heart but instead wanting to justify themselves? It's just like the lawyer in this text who wants Jesus to give him the thumbs up that he is doing everything right - proving that he was right all along.

But Jesus saw right into the man's heart, and instead of giving him a pat on the back, he responds with a question of his own - what does the law say and how do you interpret it? Jesus wanted to engage the man further, seeing where his own justification lies. To which the man replied, "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." - right of Deut. and Leviticus.

Jesus then answered that the man was right and that he should live into what the law says. But that answer didn't satisfy the lawyer at all. He wanted to prove that he was the best of the best, and that he was going to get eternal life right here, right now - so he asked Jesus who his neighbor was - which enters us into the story commonly referred to as the Good Samaritan.

There is a lot that we can miss in our modern day understanding of this story - so let's start with the road that ran from Jerusalem to Jericho. First, it was dangerous. It was not a road that you would want to travel alone, as it was often inhabited by thieves. Why? Because of the way that it was formed. The road was only a few feet wide - with a steep drop off on one side. Thieves could hide behind boulders and then ambush folks, because there was literally no place to run to.

We can assume because Jesus didn't give the man's religious affiliation that he was a Jew. A man like the one who asked the question that led to the story in the first place. He was robbed, beaten up, and left for dead. And then other folks started to walk past him. Now I have heard plenty of justification over the years as to why those who walked by - specifically the priest and Levite - didn't help the man. But saying that they didn't see the man does not work.

Remember - narrow road - only a few feet wide with no other side of the road - they literally almost had to walk right over him in order to be on their way. They had to choose to ignore him.

But, thankfully, a third person stopped by, a Samaritan. Jews didn't like Samaritans at all. They disagreed about teachings in scripture and as a result Jews were not to have contact with the Samaritans. Yet, it was this man, the one who wouldn't have been treated kindly by the injured man in any other circumstance, who stopped what he was doing and took care of the man, going above and beyond to continue to pay for his needs until he was healed.

Jesus ends the story by asking, What do you think? Which one of these three was a neighbor to the man who encountered thieves? And the lawyer couldn't even bring himself to say the Samaritan - all he could say was the one who demonstrated mercy.

Friends, we may have heard this story before. And we may have heard about how it is a story about helping those in trouble, which is certainly true. But there is a deeper power to this story than just that. This lawyer would never have thought there could be such a thing as a Good Samaritan - in fact, even at the end of the story he couldn't bring himself to acknowledge either inside of his heart or through his words.

Who are our neighbors? Perhaps those people who are most unlike us. Perhaps those people who we even dislike.

I think the first time I remember hearing this story was in Kindergarten Sunday school class, complete with a flannel graft board with pictures. Over the years I have heard it again and again - it was often one that we even acted out in class, because it could be performed without words. Why do we keep coming back to this story, friends? Because we get it. Even kids understand the type of people in this story - there are people who are "in" and people who are "out" at school. And there is a deep truth in this story that sometimes its the people who are outsiders who are willing to give it all, even if other people may not be willing to do that for them.

We get this story even starting at a young age. But that doesn't make it any easier. We need to keep coming back to this text that we are almost too familiar with, because it hasn't changed us yet. We may still be the priest of the Levite - people who know the law to love God with all we have and all we are and to love our neighbor as ourselves, but it hasn't really changed us yet. We still stick to our categories of who is in and who is out, and we keep pushing the people on the outside further and further away.

But the truth of this story - the hard truth - is that God hasn't given up on that person who may not be like us. God isn't like the Levite or the priest, so we shouldn't be either church. Instead, God binds us together. God transforms us together - if only we let Him. May we go forth from this place, not looking for who is in and who is out, but instead listening to the call of the God who invites us to love our neighbor, all our neighbors, even those most unexpected. Amen.