

**Chapel Meditation
Berea College**

**Accent on Christian Faith
Friday, September 28, 2007**

**"A Call to Samaritan Theology"
Luke 10:25-29, 33-37
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The story is a familiar one. Jesus is approached by a religious man wanting to show off his religiosity and asks two simple but loaded questions. The first, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" and the second, "who is my neighbor?" Jesus knew that the man knew the answers to both questions. And the man knew that Jesus knew he knew the answers because after all he is described in the text as an "expert in the law." Yet there he was, standing before Jesus, bearing a mock-humility, asking questions meant not to bring about honest discussion but to show Jesus lacking in his knowledge of the law all the while showing the man's expertise and self-righteousness. And without missing a beat Jesus turns the situation on its head. First, he concedes the man's knowledge of the law when he tells the expert, "you have answered correctly," but then he begins to tell a parable. And in a wink of an eye that law expert now has to answer Jesus' question and his answer betrays both his arrogance and his sin. How did this guy get himself in such a mess? Where did things begin to go so badly that he was now the one being challenged by Jesus' teaching? What elements of the parable that Jesus told the audience were making the entire situation so religiously uncomfortable for this self-righteous Jew? Jesus the trouble maker was at it again.

The questions how does one obtain eternal life and who is my neighbor have been a part of the religious landscape for centuries. All religions seek to provide an answer to these two basic and important questions. And now Jesus is being asked to do so again. And what is of great interest is not only the fact that Jesus chooses to respond by telling a story but what demands our attention are the very concepts and ideologies that are embedded in the story. The story is really disarmingly simple and one that any person can in some way identify with: a man on his journey from Jerusalem to Jericho is attacked by robbers. And this was no ordinary hold-up or mugging--the guy was

stripped of all his belongings including his clothes, beaten, and left for dead. Having been the victim of a mugging at knife-point in NYC this story resonates with me. I remember the fear and anxiety when the young man showed me the knife and told me not to make any noise so I wouldn't get hurt. Even though in my fantasy life I can imagine myself doing box-kicking or kung-fu maneuvers like Charlies' angels, in reality I was just plain scared. My legs felt like jelly. I knew that if that young man and his friends managed to get me off that subway I would be facing some pretty awful realities. So when I hear Jesus tell the story of this poor guy beaten and robbed I can sympathize. Jesus has caught my attention and my heart. So I look for someone to change the outcome of what is so far a rather grim tale--like I did as I looked around the faces of the many people in the same train car with me and my attackers. The bottom line is that to be a victim is to be vulnerable. The victim is not only powerless but often voiceless which means invisible. The parable makes that point clear to us--v. 30 tells us the man who was attacked was left half dead. And so when I hear the parable I look for a hero, a savior. But maybe I am asking too much after all heroes and saviors are hard to come by. So instead I look for someone who at least cares.

The first guy coming along looks like an excellent prospect, he is a priest. Now we all know that clergy people love God and do good, so the priest is going to make a difference, he will show he cares. But lo and behold he sees the wounded naked man and...crosses the street. Now that is certainly not priestly behavior. Now I am perturbed. A clergy person who doesn't care, my, my, my. what is this world coming to!! Aren't clergy people called by God? Aren't they church people and isn't that a good thing? And yet he crossed the street?? But look, there is someone else coming this way.

Now I do hope this guy will do better. Yes he is a Levite and we know that Levites have some special deal going with God, so he will do the right thing. Well look at that, the Levite, just like the priest, sees the naked and wounded man and just crosses the street. Now there is something definitely wrong here. The two religious types, the ones who are the religious models for their communities, the ones who know the law and are familiar with its requirements, yet both have turned a blind eye to the wounded and robbed man lying in the street. In our church lingo we would call these two men the church-going types. Why, they may even have gone to seminary and studied the Bible, yet their behavior belies and unravels our human held notion that religious belief and

the practice of that belief are somehow mutually connected in a dialectic where belief is nourished and sustained by faith-filled action. Jesus takes that mistaken idea and tells us it just isn't so. You see, Jesus knew that like the expert in the law who stood before him asking him important theological questions, humans may profess to believe in many things, but how they take that belief and express it in concrete acts of love and mercy and justice, well that is a whole other story.

That is why the key person in the parable is the Samaritan. No need to belabor how Jews and Samaritans disliked and even hated one another. Their differences were not only religious but also cultural. Yet it is a Samaritan man who plays the role of hero in Jesus' parable. Listen to how v. 33 describes what motivated the Samaritan to reach out and help the robbed and beaten man: "...and when he saw him, he took pity on him." The Samaritan was able to identify with the victim, he was able to empathize with the man's loss and pain, he was able to understand that he too could at any moment be the one lying beaten and left for dead on that street. The Samaritan was the only one of the three men who was not so self-preoccupied and so was able to perceive his own vulnerability and able to see himself in that place of vulnerability and loss. Now if this was scandalous and outrageous to the Jews listening to Jesus they were about to be even more outraged and scandalized. Vs. 34 and 35 tell us that the Samaritan not only stopped to help the man, to physically care for him, tend to his wounds and hurts, but he provided from his own money to make sure that the needed care would be provided on a longer term basis--until the man was able to provide for himself.

I want us to stop here and listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying. We must be clear that what Jesus is describing in this parable is not the Samaritan as a do-gooder. Unfortunately it is this mentality of the do-gooder that permeates what passes for charity in this country. The works of mercy require more than a food basket or donations to Good Will. The works of mercy require risk taking because they require that the person reaching out in mercy stand "with" and not only "for" the one who has been wounded, who is vulnerable, who has been left for dead. The works of mercy reveal our own need for mercy, our own limitations, our own poverty of spirit.¹ Such revelation is more often than not frightening and something we would rather not deal with. That is

why it is so much simpler to remain at the do-gooder level. But this is not what the parable is about.

The Samaritan provided from his wealth, large or small, and was willing to do it more than once. The Samaritan dared to risk his time and his money on behalf of someone whose vulnerability left him with no options. Jesus lifts him up as the model; he is the one the expert in the law needs to emulate and herein lies the scandal. Jesus has made the hero of the parable, Jesus has made the person who responded with mercy and justice, a Samaritan. We see how Jesus takes someone who has been excluded by the Jewish community, and especially by religious Jews, and has made him the center of God's attention. It is clear to us, as it was to that audience long ago, that Jesus not only accepts the outcasts, but he saw them as the examples and symbol of discipleship in the kingdom.² That is why I call this Samaritan Theology. Samaritan Theology is about how God through Jesus the Christ de-centers the center, those places of power and prestige and wealth, and now focuses on those who have been left-out, excluded, de-valued, pushed aside, ignored, dismissed. Come on, you know who I am talking about--*those* people.

To live out the core concepts of Samaritan Theology one does not need a seminary degree to do justice and act with mercy. Why to be faithful to the call of Samaritan Theology you don't even have to speak English and no green card is required. And this is because the core concepts of Samaritan Theology, justice and mercy, which also involve hospitality and healing, are about what is at the center of the human heart. Samaritan Theology is "an invitation into an interesting life, into an unleashing of one's inner power, into authentic community, into the possibility of fulfillment in an vacuous society."³ And even more than that, Samaritan Theology is about deep and abiding love, love that is there for the long haul, it is about a deep faith that will not be easily frightened or dismayed. Samaritan Theology dares to call us, dares to summon us to do justice and show mercy, which is often a heartbreaking task.

As God speaks to us through the images and stories and challenges and heroes that are found in Samaritan Theology we must respond. To do justice and to show

¹ Dennis A. Jacobsen, *Doing Justice, Congregations and Community Organizing* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), p. 19.

² Mortimer Arias & Alan Johnson, *The Great Commission* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), p. 70.

mercy, that is what we have been called to do. To say yes to the call made to us through Samaritan Theology is to affirm life, it is to be healed and empowered, it is the stirring of the Holy Spirit in our being, it is to be released from fear so that when we come to that woman, child, or man who lies before us vulnerable and wounded we will not look away, we will not pass judgement, we will not be afraid to risk our lives so as to save theirs. When we respond to the call of Samaritan Theology we will be able to new depths of sharing, mutual love, and exuberant faith. We will be made hungry for the the experience of living in Christian community. To respond to the call of Samaritan Theology is to learn to live in true solidarity. As I said in my lecture yesterday, true solidarity is to show tenderness to the vulnerable.

And that about wraps it up. It was the tenderness of a Samaritan man that enabled him to reach out and help the robbed man. It enabled him to use his resources for the benefit of his neighbor. It enabled him to care and thereby to make a difference in an indifferent world.

[And] Jesus told him [tells us], "Go and do likewise." (v. 37b)

³ Jacobsen, p. 96.