

THE PARABLE OF THE INNKEEPER

Luke 10:25-37

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on May 24, 2020, the Seventh Sunday of Easter, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia. The church was closed for the Coronavirus pandemic and the sermon was preached to an empty sanctuary for livestreaming.

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."

In the mid-1980s I went through a period of focusing some of my study on the parables of Jesus. As a result of that study, I noticed a different angle on one of the most familiar parables in the church and culture.

We know it as the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

A man is walking alone from Jerusalem to Jericho.

He is set upon by robbers who strip him, beat him, and leave him half dead.

A priest comes, sees the man on the side of the road, crosses to the other side and passes him by.

So also a Levite, who is sort of an assistant priest.

But a Samaritan follows, sees the man lying on the side of the road, is moved with pity, approaches him, bandages his wounds, pours oil and wine on them, puts the man on his own animal, brings him to an inn, rents a room, takes care of him overnight, and the next day pays the Innkeeper for the one night and tells the Innkeeper:

"Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend."

The parable itself ends with these words of commitment on the part of the Samaritan. Then Jesus adds – by way of explanation to the person whose question had prompted the parable in the first place – that the actions of the Samaritan define what “loving neighbor” means and thus give form for what is central to Jewish and Christian faith, as well to almost every religious and ethical system known to humanity.

Because of the Samaritan's action, and Jesus holding them up, the phrase "Good Samaritan" has grown to mean anyone who helps another human being in need. It is one of the most widely known phrases in our culture that has its origin in scripture.

I.

But my study of parables in those days often led me to separate the parable proper from the interpretation that Jesus often gave them in telling them. In a playful mood, I would sometimes reverse the order of events to see if a different outcome might illumine the story as Jesus told it. I would often try to look at a parable from the viewpoint of different characters within it. You ought to try these when you've viewed everything you can possibly view on Netflix.

It is clear that the Samaritan who is the first to stop on the side of the road is worthy of all the acclaim he receives. The parable is specific and detailed in presenting his actions, the rapid-fire method of good storytelling:

*...saw the man
...was moved with pity
...went to him
...bandaged his wounds
...poured oil and wine on them
...put him on his own animal
...brought him to an inn
...took care of him.*

Bam. Bam. Bam. The Good Samaritan.

But when we use our imaginations and focus our attention on the Innkeeper, we can gain new insight.

- Once the Samaritan leaves the scene and returns to his travels, it is the Innkeeper dresses the man's wounds, as many times a day as they need dressing, until after days, weeks, months, the bandages can come off for good.
- The Innkeeper sits by the man's bed by day, and sleeps next to it at night, until it is safe to leave the man alone.
- The Innkeeper teaches the man to sit up, then to put two feet on the floor and pull himself up, then to stand for a few minutes, then to take a few steps to the chair, then to sit and hold his head up straight, then to keep his eyes open, then to return to bed again.
- The Innkeeper teaches the man to walk again, one small step at a time, over a period of months. Months.
- The Innkeeper holds the man tight through night tremors, daytime shakes, bolting up in bed, screaming through hallucinations that drive him back to the fetal position prompted by the non-hallucinatory attack he had suffered at the hands of more than one assailant.
- The Innkeeper uses his own strength to fight the strength of the man when he tries to pull himself out of bed and run away. When the man lies in the corner of the bathroom clutching the base of the laboratory to protect himself from blows, once real, now imaginary, the Innkeeper slowly tries to dislodge the man's arms from their grip around the base, to easy him back into the rest of bed.

- In more peaceful moments the Innkeeper teaches the man to lift a wet sponge to his mouth, then a cup of water, then a spoon of soup. He teaches the man to chew, to remember to swallow, to mold sounds into words, words into phrases, phrases into sentences, sentences into requests and expressions of gratitude.
- The Innkeeper teaches the man the most personal skills of cleaning, bathing, caring for teeth, beard, hair.
- And most of all the Innkeeper teaches the man – once again – to smile.

“Take care of him,” the Samaritan said. “Take care of him until I return, and then I will pay you whatever – whatever – you spend.” What the Samaritan paid – as valuable as it was – perhaps could not have matched the gift the Innkeeper gave to the man who became his border, his responsibility, his friend.

We could rename the passage the Parable of the Good Innkeeper. I don’t think Jesus would take offense at that editorial change.

II.

All this comes to mind for me because this weekend – perhaps more reverently than in past years – we remember all those who have died in military service to our nation. All those who gave their lives in the Civil War, World War I, in World War II, in the Korean War, in Vietnam, in Afghanistan and Iraq and in other battles along the way as well. We remember them with flags and parades, picnics and prayers, graves visited, decorated, marked and flowered. Perhaps this year – with all we are going through as a nation – we remember them with more reverence and seriousness than simply the beginning of the summer months.

We also – this year – find ourselves more deeply aware and therefore more appreciative of first responders – the people whose photographs we see and stories we hear narrated as they work hours and days at a time to seek to save the lives of those overcome by Covid-19, at great risk to themselves, to their families at home, to those with whom they take public transportation to work, to those who take care of their children while they take care of the world, to those who take care of their parents and grandparents at hotspots of retirement and nursing homes, prisons and meat packing plants.

We remember those who have lost their lives in this battle and who will lose their lives in the months to come.

We remember the scientists and lab technicians who work round the clock to discover a vaccine or treatment by which others of us can rest from fear and threat, and we remember the people who come in at night to clean and sanitize the sacred spaces in which scientists and technicians, doctors and nurses, labor.

Of all these, some will doubtless become as well known as the Good Samaritan, and have wings of hospitals, pieces of legislation, research labs, police and fire stations named for them. They will be the subject of novels, long-form essays, photographic exhibits, documentary films. They will become household names – like Jonas Salk and Madame Curie and Walter Reed. Ministers will point to them in future sermons on the Parable of the Good Samaritan. But most who are seeking to save our lives – your life, my life – will remain as obscure and unnoticed as the Innkeeper, playing no less and sometimes even more of a part in human healing than the better-known Samaritan.

In truth, both Samaritan and Innkeeper will play their part in the healing of a nation – indeed, the healing of a world – first, physiologically, epidemiologically; but also psychologically, morally, spiritually. There

will be Samaritans who receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom and highest military honors; one or two may be knighted; but there will be many Innkeepers worthy of those awards as well.

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In the summer of 2002, I was sitting at a banquet table in a hotel ball room for the luncheon I attended each Monday as a member of the Downtown Rotary Club in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. I happened to be seated with several burly men and women in dark blue T-shirts with insignia on the sleeves which read FDNY. They were members of the Fire Department of New York, who nine months after 9/11 were able to get away for their annual trip to the Midwest to ride in RAGBRAI – “The Register’s Annual Great Bicycle Ride Across Iowa.”

When the Rotary program began, a local television personality and comedian got up to introduce the firefighters. He gave the most moving, serious, and at the same time humorous account of what it was like to ride with these men and women across the state nine months after the heroism which didn’t even feel like heroism to them. His introduction to the three hundred community leaders at the luncheon – all dressed in business attire – led us back to that day less than a year earlier when all of us were rapt in the unselfconscious heroism of these Samaritans and Innkeepers, the women and men in blue with whom we now broke bread.

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When this pandemic has passed, all of us who survive will once again be rapt in awe and gratitude; and when we are at our best, we will once again understand the simplicity which lies at the heart of our faith, which draws us to a screen these months and which will one day draw us back to the house of the Lord we so dearly miss:

*“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.”*

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