

“The Parables According the Luke, Part One: Neighbours”:  
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)  
for June 5<sup>th</sup> 2016 (Third Sunday after Pentecost)  
by Foster Freed

Luke 10: 25-37

To dive into the distinctively Lukan parables...in other words those parables that are exclusive to the Gospel of Luke...is to dive into a mixed bag of parables: some of which are deeply challenging, others of which are profoundly comforting: some of which are familiar even to non-Christians, others of which some of you will likely be hearing for the first time; some of which seem easily interpreted, others of which are so obscure as to resist any attempt at trying to figure out what in the world they are all about. In short: our journey over the next nine weeks will be as mixed an experience as the parables themselves, starting this morning with what is certainly one of the most familiar of any parable found in Luke, indeed as familiar as any parable found in the New Testament. And yet!

Though the Parable of the Good Samaritan most certainly is well-known (its only rival may be another famous parable from Luke, that of the Prodigal Son), it's a parable that can still pack quite the punch: although I am likely getting ahead of myself by presuming that we actually know how best to interpret this familiar tale. It's not just that we poor preachers are always looking for a fresh angle when we arrive at a familiar scripture text such as this one; there's the further fact that it's impossible to side-step the controversy that has surrounded **all** of the parables of Jesus over the past century or so. Permit me to explain.

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The traditional way of viewing Christ's parables—still popular in many circles—is to regard them as charming tales housing potent but far from obscure truths: simple stories told to help even the simplest hearer grasp the Gospel. However! More recent scholarship tends to dispute that approach, arguing that the parables are actually deeply insidious stories: ticking-time bombs, tiny nuggets designed to worm their way into your consciousness so that the more you ponder them, the less certain you are as to just what they're driving at.

For what it's worth, I am in essential agreement with that point-of-view: I believe that many—perhaps most—of the parables are designed to be open ended, leaving hearers no choice but to wrestle with their far from obvious truths. Nevertheless, I'm not quite convinced that is true of all the parables...and I am far from convinced it's true of the parable of the Good Samaritan. Yes: I've heard fancy interpretations of this parable: including one ingenious interpretation that insists Jesus' real point here isn't that we ought to be like the Samaritan who helped the fallen man, but that we should go out and be like the man beaten by robbers, so that we thereby give others an opportunity to be a good neighbour to

us. That's ingenious, all right, but frankly...well, frankly it's a reading of this parable that has never rung true for me. On the contrary!

From where I stand, this is not an especially tough parable to interpret, although it is a parable I always experience on two levels. On one level, if we separate the parable out from its setting in Luke's Gospel, the parable of the Good Samaritan has an unmistakably familiar structure: a structure not all that different from jokes that begin by telling us that "a priest, a minister, and a rabbi went into a pub." Only in this case it's a Priest, a Levite and a Samaritan, walking down the road: two of whom choose to ignore a mugged and beaten stranger, one of whom chooses to help. And yes: if we were retelling the parable in the context of the Nanaimo Ecumenical Centre, it might involve, first, Father Jozef bypassing a fallen stranger, then Reverend Foster bypassing that same stranger, and then the Imam from the local Mosque stopping and helping that same fallen stranger. The point, quite simply—when the parable is isolated from its context—is that sometimes the outsider to our religious group does a far better job than the insiders: a better job of living faith in the world. So much for the first level on which this parable needs to be understood!

The other level kicks in, as soon as we ponder the parable not in isolation, but in conjunction with the question the anxious Scribe puts to Jesus. Recall that this Scribe—when asked about the way of faithfulness—answers appropriately by citing the commandment to love God twinned with the commandment to love neighbour. But the Scribe—rather than being content when Jesus expresses warm agreement with that answer—chooses to push the matter further. As the narrator explains, he's seeking to justify himself...which might be a polite way of saying that he was looking for loopholes! In short, he appears to want to define "neighbour" as narrowly as possible. Jesus will have none of it, and tells the parable: a parable which, as a response to the question "who is my neighbour", insists that **we** get to decide who our neighbours are going to be. There's no set formula provided...no sure-fire list of guidelines that can let us off the hook when friend or stranger are in need. At any moment in time we can choose whether that person will be to us a neighbour, or whether we will regard ourselves as free to walk on by. And here's the thing:

I don't think there is anything obscure about any of that. I think there can be very little debate as to what Jesus was trying to bring home with the telling of this parable. I think its key points are abundantly clear. And yet! As soon as I make that assertion, I hear in the back of my mind one of my very favourite Mark Twain quotes. "It ain't those parts of the Bible I **can't** understand that bother me; it's the parts that I **do** understand." In that regard, I'm a lot like Mark Twain.

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When it comes to the Parable of the Good Samaritan, I believe the real reason it leaves us scratching our heads isn't because we don't understand what

it's getting at...but because we understand all too well what it's getting at. On the one hand, it's one of the many sayings of the Lord that poses the question of courage. When we heard the parable Thursday morning at our Lectionary study group, the first response a participant made expressed the undeniable truth that human beings back then are a lot like human beings now: we tend to run from situations that carry risk...and yes, you had best believe that there are risks involved in stopping by an isolated road-side to assist a fallen stranger. As a matter of fact, later that same day a news item crossed my desk concerning a man in Arizona who stopped to offer help to folks who had been involved in a traffic accident just ahead of him. Unfortunately—what the Good Samaritan did not realize—was that the accident was intentional, caused by the man driving the other vehicle who crashed on purpose in order to kill his spouse with whom he was having a domestic dispute. That driver, in the aftermath of the crash, shot and killed his wife...and then shot and killed the man who stopped to help. You see: it will not do to pretend that choosing to be a neighbour doesn't carry risk. Which is why when we choose to take such risks, we will always need to summon our courage. That is part of why this parable—even though it may not be hard to interpret—can be damnably difficult to live out on a daily basis.

If the need to overcome our fears is part of what makes this parable so challenging, learning to discern how to be a neighbour in any given set of circumstances, is the other thing that makes it far easier to understand this parable than to live this parable. After all: anyone with more than one child, will realize that learning to be a good parent to one of those children will not necessarily reveal how best to be a parent to any of the others. We may seek—and ought to seek—to love each of them with an equal measure...but if we wish to be good parents to each of them, we will need to recognize that our love for them can't be a cookie-cutter love since they themselves are not cookie-cutter people. It takes discernment...it takes vision...it takes wisdom to parent well. And yes: it requires those same qualities to learn to neighbour well.

And surely...surely the elephant in the room, when we hear this parable in 2016...is those boat-loads of refugees fleeing the Middle East, whose numbers (with the coming of late spring and summer) are once again beginning to swell. That Jesus would have us regard them as our neighbours is not, I believe, something we ought to deny. And yet: it would be very wrong were I, or any other preacher, to choose to utilize this parable as a club with which to lay a guilt trip on a congregation—or the wider community—as such bodies wrestle with the numerous, gut-wrenching questions that may make it entirely possible for people of good-will...and for Christians of deep faith!...to disagree as to **how** we as disciples...and how we as Canadians...should best respond to this awful crisis: in other words: how we best become neighbour to those directly affected by global unrest. That the Parable of the Good Samaritan can orient us in the right direction is not to be doubted; but let's not pretend it provides us with a blueprint as to how to translate our good intentions into actions: even in comparatively straight-forward instances, let alone in instances that involve whole societies in

making profoundly complex decisions. No one parable provides all of the answers. Nor is it my job, this morning, to provide those stock answers: although this much I will say. I am proud and thankful to see this congregation—with our Catholic sisters and brothers—sponsoring a refugee family. Thank God for that! Thank God for you!

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Lest I end on that sombre a note, permit me a final thought.

There was a time—a time that appears to be gone forever, but who knows!—a time when it was not uncommon for Christian interpreters of scripture to provide allegorical readings of the great parables: not in place of a literal reading of those parables, but as a kind of supplementary interpretation. In the case of this parable, the traditional allegorical reading saw the man beaten by robbers as a kind of “everyman” figure: rescued by the true “Good Samaritan”, namely Christ: who restores the man to health, brings him to the Inn called the Church...and pays the cost of his ongoing care. It’s a quaint reading of the parable...one that has understandably fallen into disfavour and yes: to be honest, a reading that tends to suck the challenge right out of the parable. But this much I will say in its favour, namely this.

The life to which our Lord has called us is a profoundly challenging life: we would be fools to pretend otherwise. Were we to know nothing about the way of discipleship, other than what we learn from this one parable, we would have more than enough challenge for a life-time, learning to be a neighbour in the way Jesus invites us to be a neighbour. And I can assure you...assure you that none of us will always get it right. We’ll often find ourselves walking past all kinds of situations that cry out for our help...but we were too busy...too blind...too frightened to get involved. And sadly, at those times when we do get involved, we’ll often find ourselves lavishing the wrong kind of care on those we regard as needing our neighbourly ministrations. And so yes: knowing...knowing that we ourselves, at the end of even a comparatively good day, will likely be presented with numerous reminders of just how short of the mark we tend to fall...

...at just such times...at just such places along the road: when we have fallen...when we are bloodied and bruised...when we are ready to throw in the towel and give up on ourselves: at just such moments of the journey...we are blessed indeed to know the Christ: to know that there is One in our midst eager to cleanse our wounds, to bind up our brokenness, to wipe away our tears, to find us shelter in the storm: in short, that there is One who lives and reigns prepared to pay any price in order to be **for us** a true and faithful neighbour.

This is the Gospel of Jesus Christ! Praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ!