

So here we are, gathered around the story of the Good Samaritan again. It's like an old friend isn't it? A story we can almost recite by memory. What more can be said about a story we seem to all know? Even the culture around us has some inkling as to the content of this story – we hear about “good Samaritans” all the time.

So what can we remember about this story? First there is the question from the Jewish religious scholar, steeped in Jewish law. “What can I do to inherit eternal life?” But we have to remember this question doesn't come out of thin air. The lawyer has been hearing about the 70 followers Jesus sent out two by two, to the places he himself intended to go, but didn't make it. They've returned regaling Jesus with all the stories of miraculous healings they've been able to perform. Indeed, it was a mission where the kingdom of God had come near to those the followers had visited.

After hearing all those stories, the lawyer says in a test question, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” With his answer Jesus seems to be quite bored. “What does it say in the scriptures?” The lawyer answers with the two fold law that according to Jesus are the two most important from the Torah. “Love God, and Love your neighbour.” YAWN. Good says Jesus; he probably knew this guy already had the answer.

Then the lawyer gets kinda flip with Jesus, “yeah...but who is my neighbour?” It's a great question, prompting Jesus to tell the parable of the good Samaritan. A guy is beaten, and left for dead. A priest walks by on the other side, avoiding the guy. A Levite – like the lawyer to whom Jesus is speaking – also passes by on the other side. The hated Samaritan - he stops to help. Anyone around the church for any length of time will have heard this story many times.

As one person said at Waves on Thursday, it's been done to death. More than one sermon has been preached over the centuries on how we need to be Samaritans, to go and do likewise, if we want to inherit eternal life. Got it. It's a recipe for burn out if we behave this way with every broken person we encounter on our journeys. But okay...got it.

There is a lot of power in helping someone isn't there? There is a lot of power in seeming to be the healthy one, the strong one, the wealthy one, who offers help to those in need.

It's way easier to be a good neighbour when we have the upper hand. But what if Jesus told the story from a different perspective? What if he taught the lawyer something of humility, vulnerability and surprise? What if he told the story from the perspective the traveller?

A lawyer stood up to test Jesus and said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus answered: "what does it tell you in the law?" The man replied, "Love God and love your neighbour as yourself." "Good answer," said Jesus, "do this and you will live." But the lawyer was unsatisfied, "and who sir, is my neighbour?" Well, let me tell you a story.

"I was travelling, one Friday afternoon from Jerusalem and Jericho: I had received an urgent invitation to attend to some family business. So I was in a hurry, making good time. As I reached the more notorious section of the roadway, two bandits jumped out from the bushes. They pushed me around and demanded that I give them what money I had. Then they beat me, kicked my sides, punched my face, left me a bloody mess, hoping I would die by the side of the road. Nothing like this had ever happened to me before. I had never been more afraid in my life or felt more vulnerable.

"I moved in and out of consciousness for what seemed like hours, when I heard the sound of footsteps on the dirt. I could see with one eye the familiar garb of a priest as he made his way on the others side of the road. I'm not sure he could see me, but I knew he would not be able to stop. It was the Sabbath and he was on his way to lead the temple prayers. Touching me in anyway would leave him ritually unclean and compromised. There would be no way he could lead his people and I understood completely why he did not stop?

"I was a little more conscious when I heard feet hitting the roadway again. This time it was a Levite. A man steeped in the law of the Jewish tradition and he too was likely on his way to the temple. I couldn't stop him to ask for help, he was far too busy. He saw me kind of propped by a tree, but I tried to make it look like I was resting, and just waved a friendly hello, until he passed by.

"That hurt. By waving I realized I had dislocated my shoulder and it was so painful, I passed out. I came to when I felt someone gently rocking my body, asking if I was alright. It was all I could do to open my eyes, I was so numb and tired. As I squinted against the setting sun, I could see the familiar garb of those people from Samaria. Didn't matter that they were Jewish. Didn't matter that we all had the same ancestry.

The Samaritans had messed up the tradition so badly that we would remain forever enemies. They knew it. We knew it. This guy knew it. I knew it. What was he doing? I could barely speak, but I knew I did not want him touching me. He had no right even to come near me.

“Before I could say anything he was pouring oil and wine on my wounds. Funny, even though we are enemies we both know the ancient home remedies. He didn’t ask a thing when he propped me up, to wrench my shoulder back into place. He was very strong because again, before I knew it, he hoisted me onto his donkey and within an hour, I was resting in a bath, in a roadhouse, an hour from Jericho. I sat there feeling a confusing combination of gratitude, relief and anger. I hate feeling like I owe someone something, especially a Samaritan.

When Jesus had finished telling the story, he looked at the lawyer and said “who in this story acted like a good neighbour?” He replied, “the one who received kindness.” Jesus said, “go and do likewise.”

There was a time in New York, when Ed and I got separated on the subway. He got on, I paused and turned away for a second, thinking it was the wrong train. Before I knew it, the doors were closed and I watched as the train pulled away from the station with Ed waving on the other side of the door. I wasn’t a whole lot worried, but I really was confused about whether we were about to board the right train. Because the train had just pulled away, I was alone on the train platform. It was 1:30 in the morning.

There was just one man, who looked like he was just on this side of death; a rough character who’d seen his way around the subway system more than once. I had no choice. The maps were not clear to me. I needed help. It took some doing, to screw up my courage to ask this vagabond about the largest subway system in the world. He looked at me sideways when I first spoke to him, not sure whether he wanted to spit on me, or kill me. But soon his face cracked a smile revealing about six teeth. He jawed on about white commuters and how great Barak Obama is when finally, he gave me the information I needed. After I thanked him, we sat together in comfortable silence, worlds apart, as I waited for the next train.

Who is my neighbour, indeed? The more we imagine our neighbour to be Christ in our midst, the more we can trust our neighbour to be anyone from whom we receive mercy. Our neighbour is also the person who has the hardest time loving us. Truly. The church would do well to remember we don’t have the corner of the market on love and compassion.

I believe these Spirit given gifts live and breathe all around us, and we might even ask for help in rediscovering them for ourselves, for the sake of our own wellness. Amen