

I have had occasion in the past to speak of how over familiarity with a text can rob it of meaning. It becomes almost like wall paper. Who really looks at it? Well, I think that is the case with the Good Samaritan. Those of us who grew up in the church heard it first as children in Sunday School. I have vague memories of a picture on the wall of a classroom in the Lynn Valley United Church Sunday School, perhaps it was a copy of William Holman Hunt's painting of the Good Samaritan. In my memory it was certainly in his style. It was a picture of an exotically dressed figure bending over a clearly injured person lying on rough ground in an arid, hilly setting. The injured person was clearly a victim, and the well dressed person was coming to his aid. Well that's what nice people do; they help people my 6 or 7 year old self thought. I don't recall spending much time on the story of the Good Samaritan in the past 65 years in church, in seminary, or in reading. It was always just sort of there, not much more developed than it had become for my seven-year-old self. Yet it is undoubtedly one of the most, if not the most important parables Jesus tells, especially in our time. Its importance can easily be missed unless one understands a number of key things about the details in the parable.

First of all it is told in answer to a follow-up question: Who is my neighbour? The initial question is asked by a lawyer who wants to test Jesus *"What must I do to inherit eternal life?"* Jesus says to him *"What is written in the law?"* The lawyer

responds with the Shema: *“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 neighbour as your self.”* Jesus says do it! But the lawyer wants to nitpick, he’d like to get off on a technicality, some exception to the law, some slippery way out. So he asks, *“Who is my neighbour?”* Jesus tells the story.

Secondly it is important to know that Jews and Samaritans loathed and despised each other, notwithstanding that they each were among the 12 tribes of Israel. Samaritans were descendants of Ephraim, Manasseh, and some of the Levites close to Aaron. While the Jews were descended from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin and some Levites. After the death of Solomon the Kingdom of Israel split in two: Judah and Israel. From Judah came the Jews. So all were Israelites but not all were Jews. The split and the antipathy developed during and immediately after the Babylonian Exile which only involved the Jews. The Northern Kingdom became the Kingdom of Samaria after the name of its capital city. Samaria developed its own holy places at Dan and Bethel to rival Jerusalem. The Galileans even further to the north remained Jewish and followed Jewish custom and considered Jerusalem the holy place. Hence Mary and Joseph’s treks from Nazareth to Jerusalem for the high holy days.

In time the Samaritans intermarried with other peoples especially the Assyrians which outraged the Jews and made

**the Samaritans not only despised but unclean in Jewish eyes. In short by the time of Jesus, Jews and Samaritans were at least as bad as Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, Turks and Greeks after 1922, and Croats and Serbs in the disintegrating Yugoslavia.**

**That leads us thirdly to geography. As well you know, Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to Jerusalem regularly from Galilee and much of Jesus' ministry occurred in Galilee, but he too travelled to Jerusalem regularly and to Bethany just outside Jerusalem. The direct route between Jerusalem and Galilee passed right through Samaria which would expose pilgrims to contact with Samaritans which could render the Jewish traveller unclean. To avoid that defilement, the route most commonly used was to follow the Jordan from its source in the Sea of Galilee down to Jericho and then turn right to climb up to Jerusalem. Jericho is one of the lowest places on earth at 276 metres below sea level. Jerusalem is at 754 metres above sea level. The distance between the two is only 38 kilometres – 1030 metres in only 38 kilometres. Just imagine that on foot, or a camel, or a donkey. I have driven from Jerusalem to Jericho several times. I can tell you it is all down one way and all up the other – and that is on a modern road. If that isn't bad enough, in Jesus' time it was a dangerous place – rugged, remote, with brigands and robbers of all descriptions hidden in the hills above. It was known as the**

**Valley of the Shadow of Death referred to metaphorically as such in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm.**

**Fourthly, in Luke chapter 9: verse 51 to 56 is the story of Jesus being rejected by Samaritans when he wished to journey through their village on his road to Jerusalem – taking the more direct route. So the distancing and contempt was not one-way.**

**So in answer to the question who is my neighbour? Even with the antipathy between Samaritans and Jews, the tremendously challenging landscape, and his recent rejection by Samaritans, Jesus makes the Samaritan, the outcast, the should be villain, the hero of the story who truly understand who is his neighbour. In short, everyone is our neighbour. There is no getting off on a technicality for the lawyer or for us.**

**But let us go a little further. Firstly a priest, a Kohanim known today as a Cohen a direct descendant of Aaron passed the injured traveller by. And then a Levite, a tribe dedicated to supporting the priests passed by. Now this is not hard to understand. This was dangerous ground no one in their right mind tarried. The assailants of the unfortunate victim could have been right behind a boulder watching for their next mark. But the Samaritan stopped. He committed not only his time, his care, his money, but he committed his safety. The other more sensible folk knew to keep going, try to ignore the problem lest you get into a mess from which you cannot**

**extricate yourself. Jesus doesn't tell us whether the victim was a Jew or not. But the Samaritan helped him even if he had every reason to know that if the victim had not been quite so far gone, he would have rejected the help lest he become unclean.**

**Now little us be clear that this parable is not a paeon of praise of Samaritans. It is an explanation of how one good person can overlook who are the objects of their help and just give it out of a sense of shared humanity and do so knowing there are risks from the brigands who assailed the victim and even risks from the victim him or herself.**

**Can we be like the Good Samaritan? God knows there are endless needs for such a person – even a legion of such persons – even on our island, leave alone our wider world.**

**As Christians we know that we cannot move forward unless we repent of that which has been holding us back. But while repentance of our personal issues is profoundly important. Whom have I hurt? Whom have I ignored? Of what opportunities to build the Kingdom have I allowed to pass me by? But we also have issues requiring repentance at a collective level.**

**We are caught up in a cultural paralysis. We are less and less a society, less and less possessed of a collective sense and it is ruining us. I recently read a review by Daniel Trilling in the London Review of Books of new book called Disaster**

**Nationalism by Richard Seymour. When I read the following I immediately thought of the Good Samaritan:**

***For Seymour, the determining factor is neoliberalism, whose ruins we continue to inhabit, as governing elites have struggled in the aftermath of the crash (of 2008) either to shore up the system or forge an alternative. Neoliberalism, Seymour writes, drawing on the work of the economic historian Philip Mirowski, aimed to persuade the masses ‘to abandon tribal sentiments of solidarity and accept the law of universal competition’. The result, amid soaring wealth inequality, is a ‘paranoid system’: if everyone is a potential competitor, there can be no meaningful social sphere, public services will be corrupt and inefficient, and welfare recipients will be regarded as freeloaders. This is a recipe for ‘resentment, envy, spite, anxiety, depression and rage’, whose long-term effects – in the West, at least – are declining social trust, increased loneliness and a rise in political violence, even as other forms of violent crime have fallen.***

**A certain wedding in Venice a fortnight ago might serve as an illustration of some of these thoughts. But we should be laser-like in our avoidance of self-righteousness in the face of such mind-boggling indulgence. Even the most challenged amongst us are much richer than the poorest in this world. How are we caring for those in our midst leave alone those in so much worse circumstances?**

Last year the World Health Organization issued a bulletin. Here is a short excerpt: *Social isolation and loneliness are widespread, with around 16% of people worldwide – one in six – experiencing loneliness. While the latest estimates suggest that loneliness is most common among adolescents and younger people, people of all ages experience loneliness – including older people, with around 11.8% experiencing loneliness. A large body of research shows that social isolation and loneliness have a serious impact on physical and mental health, quality of life, and longevity.*

*Social isolation and loneliness are increasingly being recognised as a priority public health problem and policy issue across all age groups....*

In 2023, the US Surgeon General also published a paper entitled: *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation.*

In 1987 the late Margaret Thatcher, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom gave an interview to the Women's Own. The following is a quote: *I think we have gone through a period when too many children and people have been given to understand 'I have a problem, it is the Government's job to cope with it!' or 'I have a problem, I will go and get a grant to cope with it!' 'I am homeless, the Government must house me!' and so they are casting their problems on society and who is society? There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are families and no government*

***can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first.***

**The two most evil phrases in that quote are in ascending order: *...who is society? There is no such thing! and people look to themselves first.***

**Now I don't think the late Lady Thatcher had any idea of how pernicious her statement was. It was the equivalent of Marie Antoinette's much mocked and unjustly attributed statement in response to the poor having no bread, *Qu'ils mangent de la brioche*" Why don't they eat cake?. Brioche, of course was very much more expensive than bread.**

**Nevertheless, Margaret Thatcher's statement became an almost spiritual affirmation of the power of selfishness especially when coupled with the trickle-down economics of the Regan administration in the United States. It is a pandemic that has been growing and growing across the world where the richer are beyond imaginably richer and the poor nearly beyond hope.**

**It is very important to note that universal competition and the alienation it engenders is becoming one of the greatest impediments to solving major world problems most notably human created climate change. For the extent we are alienated one from another, we are also alienated from our planet and its ecology, but that is a topic for another homily.**



**Everything in our faith teaches us that we are here to love God and our neighbours as ourselves, yet those who benefit from a culture and economics of selfishness often proclaim their fealty to God, but it would never occur to them to worry about who is my neighbour. Those who are needy and those who try to make their lot better are ever more cast in the roles of the failures, the daemonic, the lost, those who would corrupt the good, those who are, indeed, cast into the pit.**

**What are we to do?**

**First of all we must acknowledge our enormous privilege even though it might seem trivial compared to those at the pinnacle of the culture of selfishness. Our greatest trap is to becoming locked in envy of those who have so much more than we, failing to recognize how much more we have than most.**

**Secondly we should be prepared for sacrifice. If the lot of the poorest among us is to be alleviated, know that we will have to pay the price. Because in the world that glorifies riches, the mega-rich will find a way to dodge the cost.**

**Thirdly we must cling to and build up our bastion of faith. We are a minority, but if we model faithfulness in our commitment to God and neighbour, to use the words of an old, no longer fashionable hymn, speaking of the Kingdom, *And soul by soul and silently its wondrous bounds increase. And all its ways are gentleness and all its paths are peace.* Let**

**us pray that all our ways become gentle and our paths full of peace.**

**So let us come back to our reading about the Good Samaritan. What can we take away? Interestingly enough it is from the lawyer trying to equivocate on what he had to do to assure eternal life. It is the Shema: thou shalt love God...and your neighbour as yourself. Clearly the lawyer and generations of translators did not entirely understand. These are not two commandments. The so-called first cannot be observed unless we observe the so-called second, and we cannot observe the second if we do not observe the first. They are mutually dependent. If I cannot love God, I have nothing with which to love neighbour, and if I cannot love neighbour I make a mockery of my supposed love of God. Too often we have deluded ourselves that we can do the first – love God for all we can get – and let the second take care of itself. If we can't observe the second, the so-called first is a failed goal and vice-versa no matter how comfortably we delude ourselves.**

**We were created to be here for one another. We derive the strength so to be from our relationship with God. If we fail to be here for one another, we have lost the connection to God.**

**If we have so succumbed to the notion of the separation of the individual from our fellow humans and all creation we are seriously damaged people and likely to be destroyed by our loneliness and destroy others and the planet in the process..**

**Homily for July 13<sup>th</sup>, 2025 – Luke 10: 25 – 37**

**Walter Stewart**

**The Good Samaritan was a descendant of some who spent the 40 years in the wilderness knowing the Shema. The Good Samaritan acted upon it. Let us do the same.**

**Amen**