

HOMILY

Proper 16 C

Luke 10.35-37

St Peter, Quamichan

13.7.25

A “good Samaritan” – my guess is that for most Canadians, this connotes an untrained passerby who leaps into action in the face of some medical or violent crisis. “Good Samaritan” laws, for example, protect people who make a harmful mistake in the course of such an intervention: let’s say, I try to get you out of a burning car, but in the process, I sever your spinal cord.

And while it is certain that Jesus would have approved of coming to the aid of a stranger in distress, I would like to suggest that this is the *premise* and not the *point* of his Parable of the Good Samaritan. *Of course*, helping the man who fell among robbers on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho was the right thing to do! And shame on those who didn’t. But the real issue at stake here is not that we should be kind to our neighbours, but rather to take careful note of who in the parable *was*.

You see, we are so used to the phrase “good Samaritan” that we have lost touch with the fact that in Jesus’ time, this would have been like describing a square circle, or a yellow White House. A “*good Samaritan*” was a contradiction in terms. There was long history here, going back several centuries, when the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel were conquered by opposing factions. The Jews in the south coped by circling the wagons, and creating a faithful enclave in the midst of Babylon, observing rituals, dietary laws, Sabbath, and so on. By contrast, and the Jews living in Samaria coped by adopting some of the practices of their captors. (When in Rome..., as we say). The southern kingdom neither forgot nor forgave their “sellout.” A good Samaritan? Not even possible.

And here we have Jesus telling a story about good faithful observant Jews (a priest and a Levite) failing to do the obviously good thing – in order to fulfill the demands of their religion. Gotta get to church! Can’t touch a dead body (he might be dead, you know), because the extensive cleansing ritual to follow will mean I’ll have to send the *Curate* to say grace at the Parish Supper.

The point of this parable is that person who steps up to the plate, who does the right thing, is the most despised person in that society – the person least likely to have a religious bone in his body.

This parable is a condemnation of righteousness that misses the mark of charity – of churches that do worship well, and leave the poor in the ditch. It is a condemnation of our social constructs (with the well-educated and highly esteemed at the apex of glory, and those who don't fit our idea of propriety at the bottom).

Jesus is challenging the assumptions and social and religious hierarchy of his day: and by extension, of ours.

And just for the record, in my own experience, it is indeed very often those we consider least who measure up to Jesus' expectation of charity. To wit, I close with the true story of Paul.

Paul [blind woman].

Who is my neighbour? It might just be the least likely person in the room.