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Luke 10:25-37 (the Good Samaritan)

The story of the Good Samaritan makes me think about hitchhikers.

I know it's a bad idea to pick up hitchhikers, but when I hear this parable, I feel like Jesus is asking me to do it anyway.

Now, this can be the trouble we get into when we read the bible too directly or too literally.

I don't think the parable of the Good Samaritan is about our responsibility to be impossibly responsible at every turn – sometimes it's ok to call an ambulance, and in fact, there might be some eyebrows raised if you took an injured person to a motel overnight and tried to care for them yourself.

And sometimes we need to be wary, because helping a stranger in a generous way can lead to being taken advantage of or getting hurt ourselves.

So, I don't advise you to pick up hitchhikers.

The story of the Good Samaritan isn't really about going above and beyond the call of duty and helping everyone we meet – it's not a parable about "how to love my neighbor". It's a parable that answers the question "who is my neighbor?"

It's a lawyer who asks that question.

And lawyers like to have their terms defined. They know that the ways questions and answers are phrased are very important. If finding eternal life requires loving his neighbor, then the lawyer needs to know: well, just who is my neighbor?

We look down on lawyers for this kind of thing sometimes, but here, a lawyer is doing us a favor – pushing Jesus to tell us more. And the lawyer also reminds us that Jesus welcomed people to ask him questions!

But, as usual, Jesus doesn't have many answers; instead, as is so often his indirect (and even tricky!) way, he tells a story. And I think if we listen closely, we can hear more than one answer to that question: who is my neighbor?

Now, I don't know about you, but so often I've heard this story and (when I've been able to hear it at all, because we've heard it so many times) – I hear it a certain way.

I hear Jesus telling the lawyer and telling me to be the Good Samaritan: “your neighbor is a stranger lying in the road, from a country you don't like, dying from their injuries.

“Your love means helping that person and bringing them back to health and healing.”

Living as we do, as people with resources far far beyond the resources of most of the other human beings in God's world, this is definitely a call for our Christian life.

Our neighbors are lying in ditches from Louisiana to Afghanistan.

This is a very powerful way to understand the parable.

But I want to explore two other ways to hear the parable with you.

So, we can hear the parable as an observer, we can see the priest and the Levite walk by, ignoring the person in the ditch. We can walk each person walk by – 1, 2, 3 – and see that we're supposed to be like the Good Samaritan.

That's the first way to read the story, the way we usually hear it.

We identify with the Good Samaritan, and we know that's who Jesus would have us be like, rather than the priest or the Levite.

But what if we hear the story and see ourselves with the man lying half-dead on the road, instead?

That's who Jesus starts the story with, after all. That's the main character of the story, not the Good Samaritan.

If we identify with the dying person, the parable isn't like watching a play at all – we're the ones who need help. We're the ones who are in danger. We're hearing the parable from the bottom of the ditch, and the three passers-by are walking by above us, instead of in front of us.

We're not always the righteous, completely healthy person, walking by.

Sometimes we're the broken, injured one, left in a ditch.

Sometimes we're the injured one, and we might not even realize it.

That way of listening to the parable brings us to another question, too.

Is there someone who you'd really hate to have be the person who would stop and save you?

Gosh darnit-all God, couldn't it have been anyone other than Wreh Rwhreh?

And God calls us, sometimes, to walk our path to salvation with the help of people we don't agree with, or people who turn our stomachs, or people we look down on.

Jews didn't like Samaritans, and Samaritans didn't like Jews.

And sometimes God might send someone to save us or heal us who we might otherwise not choose to associate with, or someone we might even call an enemy.

Being committed to neighbor love means not just offering help to those people, but accepting help from them, too.

The third way we might hear this parable is still to put ourselves in the place of the person dying by the side of the road,

but to see the people walking by a little differently.

A priest first – who served in the Temple. The priest is a symbol for religion, for the church, for the actions and rituals of Jewish and Christian life.

If Jesus tells a story where a priest walks by you, dying in the ditch, I wonder if he's trying to say that religion alone can't save us – going to worship, receiving the Eucharist, reading the Bible, listening to what your priest says (!). All those actions can do a lot, but they won't heal you, save you, or rescue you from sin and death by themselves.

A Levite walks by – a Levite was a member of a family clan who was sort of like the upper class members of Jewish society. Like the Brahmin in Indian society. You were born a Levite, and as a Levite you could serve as a priest or a scholar.

If Jesus tells a story where a Levite walks by you, dying in the ditch, I wonder if he's trying to say that prestige and learning can't save you either. Power in society? Nope.

Wealth and financial security? Nope. Understanding, knowledge, being able to answer the hardest Bible trivia questions? Nope.

All those things can help you help others and can help you make the world a better place, but they aren't enough by themselves.

When the Samaritan walks by – the outsider, the stranger – he stops. He bandages your wounds, he puts you on his donkey and brings you to a safe place, he finds someone else to help you, and promises to cover all the costs of your recovery.

Now, if Jesus was telling that story to you, who could that person be but Jesus?

Jesus the outsider. Jesus the wanderer. Jesus the healer of our wounds. Jesus who saves us from death.

All three ways, whether we are the Good Samaritan, or whether the Good Samaritan is someone who is “the other” to us, or whether the Good Samaritan is Jesus himself, are all doorways into the meaning of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Perhaps even better is to combine the three of them.

All are answers to the question, “Who is my neighbor?”

And all lead us to Jesus' final words to the lawyer...

“go and do likewise.”

Amen.