

Sermon for July 10, 2016 "The Good Muslim"

Luke 10:25-37

One day Jesus was teaching on the front steps of the church, as was his habit, and a crowd gathered to listen. One of the people in the crowd was a Seminary Professor, a Bible scholar. She wanted to show off, so she said to Jesus, "Doctor, what must a person do to receive eternal life?" Jesus said, "What does the Bible say?" The professor liked this response. It gave her a chance to show off some more. She said, "You must love God with all you mind, soul and strength. And you must love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus said, "That's right! Now do it." But the professor wasn't finished showing off, so she asked, "Who is my neighbor?"

Jesus answered her question by telling a story that might have gone something like this. "One day a man was going down the road from Greenville to Travelers Rest. As he was driving along a gang attacked him. They ran him off the road and stole his wallet. They took his new suit, and beat him up. Then they took his car and left him there bleeding, to die on the side of the road. It just so happens that a Methodist preacher was headed to Greenville to lead an ecumenical service that night. When she saw the man on the side of the road she started to slow down to see who he was. But then she realized that the man was half naked. She thought, 'That man is probably drunk.' So she stepped on the gas and went on past. Then a church program director who was headed to a District planning meeting came along. Like the preacher he too slowed down to take a good look. Then he thought, 'He looks pretty bad. What is the people who did this come back to finish the job and find me trying to help him?' So he passed on by also leaving the man to die. Next a Muslim drove by. She slowed down and saw the man bleeding on the side of the road. She stopped her car and jumped out. She quickly called 911 and put her phone on speaker. She applied pressure to stop the bleeding and elevated his feet just as the operator told her to prevent shock and she stayed with the man until the EMS came. As she waited she thought, so many of my family have suffered like this. I can imagine how he must feel."

Then Jesus turned to the Professor and said, "Now, if you were the one robbed by the gang which would you think acted like a neighbor." The professor said, "Well...Uh...I guess the one who acted neighborly and helped the man; the Muslim?" Jesus said, "Right, now you go and do the same."

We know the story as the "Good Samaritan." But we don't really understand what that means. To us the word "Good" and the word "Samaritan" go together. When someone does something good we call them a Good Samaritan. I have even heard people says of a do gooder "She's such a Samaritan." The organization that does humanitarian work in conjunction with the Billy Graham ministries is called "Samaritan's Purse" as if doing good is endemic to being a Samaritan.

To the Jews of Jesus' day the label "Good Samaritan" would've been an oxymoron; a contradiction in terms: like "open secret" or "deafening silence." "Good" is the last word one of Jesus' contemporaries would have used to describe a Samaritan. In fact the Apocryphal book of Sirach written about 180 BC called them foolish. (Sirach 50:26) When children got mad and each other and decided to call each other names, I imagine they might have called each other "Samaritan!" I can just hear it: "You, you, you ... Samaritan." "Ahh, them's fightin' words!" In fact in John the religions leaders do that; they called Jesus "demon possessed" and "a Samaritan" as if, for them, those two things go together. (John 8:48)

You have to understand the history behind this hatred. Over 900 years before Jesus after the death of Solomon the northern part of Israel broke away from the southern. The capital of the northern kingdom was Samaria. The Temple was in Jerusalem, the capital of the southern kingdom, so the king in the north set up temples at Dan and Bethel so that the people could worship there. But God's temple with the Ark of the Covenant and the priests God chose were in Jerusalem. So the people in the south questioned who these norther tribes were really worshipping.

Several hundred years later the northern kingdom was conquered and the leaders taken off. The people that were left intermarried with the new people brought in and the lines between God's people and the Gentiles was further blurred. By Jesus' day, the Jews of the former southern kingdom considered the Samaritans a completely different race of people. We see all this in Jesus' discussion

with the Samaritan woman at the well. She asks Jesus if they should worship in the hill shrines like the Samaritans, or in Jerusalem like the Jews. Jesus tells her that the Jews have it right, but that will soon be a moot point because the whole spiritual landscape is about to change. (John 4:23)

With all this in mind I pondered how to retell the parable of the Good Samaritan in modern terms. You all know by now how I like to retell biblical stories in a modern setting to bring them to life. So the Lawyer, who was an expert in the Law of God, becomes a Bible Scholar. Jerusalem a large city and Jericho a smaller one become Greenville and Travelers Rest. This style of Biblical storytelling is based on the work of Clarence Jordan, a Greek Scholar, Baptist minister, and founder of Koinonia Farms. But he is probably most famous for the “Cotton Patch Gospels” in which he used his knowledge of Greek to retell the Gospels and other New Testament books in his contemporary setting. When Clarence Jordan, who was living in Georgia in the 1960’s, tells the story of the Good Samaritan, the Samaritan is a black truck driver.

I have told the story of the Good Samaritan several times. Sometimes he has been an African America and sometimes a Hispanic person. When I saw that this lesson was coming up in the lectionary I pondered who the Samaritan in our day and age is. Jesus had used the Samaritans because for the Jews he was speaking to, a Samaritan is last person they would want helping them or that they would like to help. Who are the Samaritans in our day?

Then it dawned on me that the parallels between Samaritans in Jesus’ day and Muslims in our day were numerous. You know the Jews and Samaritans believed in many of the same things. They believed in one God. They believed in the formative stories of Judaism, and honored their ancestors like Abraham, Isaac & Jacob. But they also disagreed on key points like where to worship God. Likewise Christians and Muslims believe in many of the same things. We believe in one God who is the creator of all things. We both believe in surrendering to God and praying fervently. We believe in many of the same books of our Bible and in the faith of Abraham. Did you know that Muslims even believe in Jesus’ virgin birth? I know some Christians who don’t believe in that. But we also disagree on some key points. Muslims believe Jesus was a great prophet, but that he was not the only begotten Son of God. They also don’t believe in the incarnation or the Trinity.

But perhaps most importantly just as many in Jesus’ day would have found it hard to comprehend of a good Samaritan, many in our society would find it hard to conceive of a good Muslim. Islam has been too often characterized as a religion of hate and violence. Yes, some have used Islam to foster hatred and to lead people to violence. But the same has been done to Christianity. Both the Nazis and the KKK have co-opted Christian symbols and stories and even institutions to foster hate and violence. What religion in the history of the world has not been misused by bullies to justify their acts of terror? Christians would rightly say that what the Nazis and KKK did were un-Christian. Most Muslims say the same about terrorist; that their acts are cowardly and un-Islamic.

When Jesus finished the parable he turned to the teacher of the Law and said, “Who was neighbor to the man who fell among thieves?” It wasn’t the priest or the Levite. They were supposed to stop and help because the Israelite was their neighbor. It was the despised outsider with the questionable religion, the Samaritan, who turned out to be the loving neighbor; the Samaritan fulfilled the law of God while the religious folk failed. It was an indictment of the religious leaders’ failure to be good Jews and love their neighbor. Then Jesus lowered the hammer. He said to the Law expert, “Go and do likewise,” or in other words, “Go act like a ‘good’ Samaritan.” That would be like telling a Clemson fan they should act like a good Gamecock! – or vice versa.

So in conclusion: Go and live like a good Muslim. Too often it is the so called “Christians” that are failing to love their Muslim neighbors in our society. Instead of driving by while our Muslim neighbors are suffering, we should be standing with them. Instead of trying to ban them from our country, we should be reaching out to love them and help them. Instead of spreading ignorance and prejudice about Islam, we should be learning about it and teaching the truth.

Who is your neighbor? Who are the people you pre-judge and despise? They are your neighbor, be they black or white or Mexican or Muslim or gay or a woman or whatever. Be a Good Samaritan to all of them. You never know, you might discover what it means to be a good Christian in the process!