

Proper 10C 2019 SSP

St. Luke 10:25-37 “**Surprise Samaritan**”

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Is Jesus’s story of the Good Samaritan the best known and most popular of his parables? That’s my guess. My guess also is that the context and details of the story that gave it its power and sharp edge when Jesus told it are not well known. Were they well known, would the story be so popular? Let’s go over it and see for ourselves.

The first thing to notice is the setting is in Samaria and the context is one of hostility. A bit earlier, as Jesus was walking with his disciples on the way to Jerusalem, he crossed into Samaria from Galilee (his home neighborhood) to go through it to Jerusalem. The Samaritans were the people left over from the conquest of northern Israel seven hundred years before and had mixed ethnically and religiously with other peoples. Southern Judah and Jerusalem fell a few centuries after the north and had remained ethnically and religiously Jewish through Babylonian captivity. So the Samaritans were not pure or orthodox Jews, and there was hostility between the two peoples. Jews looked upon Samaritans as ethnic and religious half-breeds, whereas Samaritans had their own shrine and rituals.

When some Samaritans heard Jesus and his disciples were heading for Jerusalem, they did not receive them into their village. The disciples James and John wanted Jesus to call down fire from heaven on these Samaritans, but Jesus rebuked them. (Lk 9:55) And on they went.

When we get to today’s Gospel, as Jesus has been speaking, a certain lawyer stands up to test him, asking, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” It isn’t a sincere question, because when Jesus answers him with a summary of the Law of Moses (love the Lord with all your heart, and your neighbor as yourself), the questioner persists. Saint Luke describes the

persistence, “But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’” Jesus had already said, concerning loving God and loving one’s neighbor, “Do this, and you will live.” But the lawyer was seeking to catch Jesus, not to follow him.

And Jesus’s story of the Good Samaritan takes the questioner up, not on his trap, but on his original question! But Jesus’s explosive answer doesn’t come until the conclusion.

First he tells the story of the man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho. Jerusalem is a signal that the man, the victim of the beating and robbing, is a Jew. [By the way, you really do go down from Jerusalem to Jericho: Jerusalem is 2,500 feet above sea level; Jericho is 700 feet below sea level, near the Dead Sea which is lowest place on the planet.] The Jewish man is left half dead. Jesus has drawn an historically accurate picture of the perils of travel in that time and place. His fellow countrymen and co-religionists, first a priest and then a Levite, each see the victim and, because of the great inconvenience perhaps including reasons of ritual purity, pass by on the other side of the road.

Then comes the Samaritan, who saw the Jew, had compassion, bound up the man’s wounds and poured on oil and wine, put him on his beast which he himself had perhaps been riding, and took him to the inn where he further took care of him. He paid the innkeeper two denarii (about two days’ wages), telling him to look after the man while he was away, “and whatever you spend, when I return, I will repay you.” It is a dramatic difference.

But Jesus has not answered the trap question. Instead, he has told the lawyer, and his overhearing disciples (including James and John those “sons of thunder”) and others a story not expected. The object of concern, the victim, is a fellow Jew. The one who is following the Law of Moses in this extraordinary case is an outcast, the Samaritan.

And then Jesus asks the lawyer, “Which of these three, do you think, *proved neighbor* to the man who fell among the robbers?” The lawyer cannot bring himself to say the word, Samaritan, and replies, “The one who showed mercy on him.” Yes. Jesus answers, “Go and do likewise.”

Although Jesus did not fall for the lawyer’s trap question, he answered his original question about what must be done to inherit eternal life; answered it twice. First he answered it with the summary of the law of Moses. Second, he answered it with great specificity. But the doer of the deed which leads to eternal life is not a Jewish scribe, not a Jew at all, but rather one of those despised Samaritans.

So the lawyer, the one who tried to trap Jesus over a question about just who was his neighbor, is given a splendid answer about what he is to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus tells him, Go, and do like that Good Samaritan.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.