The Good Samaritan

By Keith E Gatling

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Lessons for Pentecost 6, Proper 10 in Year C
Deuteronomy 30:9-14
Psalm 25:1-9
Colossians 1:1-14
Luke 10:25-37

The Good Samaritan. What on earth can I possibly tell you about the Good Samaritan that you haven't heard 1000 times before? What new spin can I put on this that you haven't heard since you were a kid?

We all know the setup. The poor guy's on his way from Jericho to Jerusalem when he's attacked and left for dead. The two people he thought would help him, a Levite and a priest, fellow Israelites, pass him by, while the person voted most likely to spit on him as he lay there - a Samaritan - took pity on him and took care of him. The point of the story? That your neighbor isn't only the people who are like you or live near you, but everyone you come in contact with. Done.

Except for one thing. Maybe we don't know the story. Did anyone catch where I messed up? I didn't notice until I re-read it a few weeks ago.

The man wasn't going from Jericho to Jerusalem, he was going from Jerusalem to Jericho. Why is this such a big deal? Well, for one, it pretty much ruins the point I was going to make when I realized that I'd be preaching on this lesson. And yet, in ruining my point, it's important in that setting the story up this way, Jesus didn't give anyone an excuse.

For if everyone had been heading toward Jerusalem, there would be a few problems for the priest and the Levite. You see, our friend there had been beaten and left for dead. The Levite and the priest, both traveling toward Jerusalem, could very well have been on their way to perform some service at the temple. Some service for which touching a dead body would make them ritually unclean. If they were traveling toward Jerusalem, both the priest and the Levite could make the argument that serving in the temple was more important than stopping to take care of a person who was most likely dead.

They could make that argument, but the Archangel Wayne won't let me accept it.

You've never heard of the Archangel Wayne? Well then let me fill you in. Wayne Williams had one of the most beautiful tenor voices that any of us in the Hendricks Chapel Choir had ever heard. He wasn't bad looking either, and between the two, half the girls in choir were after him, and he got the nickname of the Archangel Wayne.

The Archangel Wayne won't let me accept the possible excuse of the priest and the Levite because of something I heard him sing. It was a snippet from some oratorio whose name escapes me. The words of this snippet were from Joel 2:13, the passage...
that says “rend your heart and not your garments.”

What does this have to do with the situation on the road to Jericho? Because it is very similar to Hosea 6:6, which reads, “I desire mercy and not sacrifice.”

Mercy and not sacrifice. What does this mean? It means that for the priest and the Levite, nothing was more important than helping our friend lying there on the side of the road. That’s right, nothing. Nothing they may have been on their way to do at the temple was more important than showing mercy to that man - even if it meant becoming ritually unclean and having to miss their shifts at the temple altogether.

It sort of reminds me of an old episode of Astro Boy. Surely I’m not the only one here who remembers Astro Boy - you know, the Japanese animation show about the robot boy who belonged to Dr Elefun? Anyway, as I remember it, in this particular episode there was a race between the robots, with a huge prize and great honors at stake. Astro Boy was in the lead, a sure thing to win. But as he was rounding the last bend, he saw a fire, and along with several other robots, left the race to help out. The one remaining robot saw this as his chance to win the prize, and so continued on to the finish line. And it was there that he found out that he had actually lost. Because the contest was not about power and speed, but about the willingness to help others. The fire was actually part of the race, and the robots who left the contest to help out there were the winners.

These would all be great points to make had everyone been traveling from Jericho to Jerusalem. But they weren’t. So what are we left with now?

Well, there is one little thing. Let’s take a look at why Jesus tells the story in the first place - the lawyer who wants to know what he needs to do to inherit eternal life.

Now, without taking any cheap shots at lawyers, it’s worth noting that he doesn’t ask “What can I do to inherit eternal life,” but rather “What must I do.” The choice of words is very important here. For to me, the word “can” implies a number of things that could be gracedly done, while the word “must” implies a legalistic minimalism. It says to me, “What do I absolutely have to do to seal the deal?”

Rather than give a straight answer back, Jesus returns the question to the lawyer and asks him what’s written in the law. Well, our lawyer friend knows the answer to that one, but doesn’t seem to want to let it alone. He wanted to fine tune it, to narrow down his responsibility to as few people as possible. He wanted to know just how little he could get away with doing and still inherit eternal life.

The answer Jesus gave by way of the parable must’ve taken him aback, because Jesus basically said that he was, and we are, responsible for helping everyone, and demonstrated it clearly by using the example of the Samaritan, a person from a group of people hated by most Israelites.

We are responsible for trying to help everyone. It’s not enough to say, “I’m taking care of people in my own family.” Or “I’m taking care of people in my own town.” Or “I’m taking care of people in my own ethnic group.” These are all good places to start, but we shouldn’t limit ourselves to these. We
shouldn’t think that if we’ve helped these, we’ve done our bit.

Now, practically speaking, we can’t help everyone. There is but so much one person can do. There’s but so much any group of people can do at any one time. It’s even possible that by trying to help, you may be getting in the way of people who can do a much better job. But there needs to be a desire and a willingness to help.

There’s a flip side to helping too. So many of us think of ourselves as the helpers, as the givers, and will run ourselves into the ground to help others while not accepting any help for ourselves. But sometimes the greatest gift you can give is that of letting someone else help you. Because as much as we are called to help others, others are called to help us too.

There is just one more thing though. With all the new spins I’ve tried to put on this parable, let’s not forget the one obvious one that most of us have known since we were kids. And that is that sometimes the one who treats us most as a neighbor is the last person we expected to do so. And we should be willing to do the same.

This is most certainly true.