
Everyone is our Neighbour

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 13 July 2025

Colossians 1:1-14 • Luke 10:25-37



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

When Jesus began his ministry, he was around thirty years old, and we believe he traveled and preached for about three years before going to the cross. Although his teachings recognised and supported what were then the Holy Scriptures, now known to us as the Old Testament, his teaching represented a break with the past in many important ways. The law, that is, the Ten Commandments, while it still stood and was to be followed, would not be the basis for our righteousness. You would not receive eternal life if all you did was follow the law, or made the proper sacrifices. Jesus taught that faith in him was the key to salvation. In teaching this, Jesus upset a lot of ideas that the Jews had about life and how to live it. Today's Gospel, which we usually call the parable of the Good Samaritan, is a great example of this.

The story is familiar: a man is traveling down a desert road when he is attacked by robbers, beaten and left for dead. Three other travellers come along and see the poor wounded man lying by the road. Two of them pass by without trying to help, but the third, a Samaritan (that is, a native of Samaria, a region north of Jerusalem along the Mediterranean), stops to help the man. The Samaritan bandages the man's wounds, takes him to an inn, and pays for his lodging and food for the next several days until he can return.

Jesus tells this story in response to a wealthy young man's question about how he may obtain eternal life. The young man knows the Jewish creed, to love God with heart and soul and mind and strength, and your neighbour as yourself. But he asks a question, perhaps to test Jesus: Who is my neighbour?

It is clear from the way the question is asked that the man expects Jesus to reply that these sorts of people are your neighbours, and these other sorts are not. Probably the man believes that only devout Jews are his neighbours, and all other people certainly are not. Jesus can tell this is what is going through the man's mind. There is some semi-Scriptural support for this. As you know, the Bible we have comprises the Old Testament, the books from Genesis to Malachi, and the New Testament, from Matthew to Revelation. These are known as the Canon, and a canon in this case simply means the books which we believe are truly inspired by God. But there were many other writings, primarily in the few hundred years before Christ, which are not part of the Canon, and we refer to them as the Apocrypha, a word from the Greek which means "hidden." These books are published in some Bibles, and do contain valuable moral material, and some interesting stories.

One of the Apocryphal books is called The Wisdom of Sirach, or sometimes Ecclesiasticus, believed to have been written by a Jewish teacher around 180 years BC. The beginning of chapter 12 reads:

Give to the devout, but do not help the sinner.
Do good to the humble, but do not give to the ungodly;
hold back their bread, and do not give it to them,
for by means of it they might subdue you;
then you will receive twice as much evil
for all the good you have done to them.
For the Most High also hates sinners
and will inflict punishment on the ungodly.
Give to one who is good, but do not help the sinner.

(Sirach 12:4-7)

If the young man was thinking of this teaching, then he would naturally think that there are two kinds of people: neighbours and non-neighbours.

So Jesus tells him a story. In it, a Samaritan, who is most definitely an outsider, is the only one who helps the wounded man. He does for him as one would do for a friend. The young man before Jesus would certainly not consider a Samaritan to be either a friend or neighbour.

But the world is changing, and God is changing it. No more will the Jews be God's only chosen people. Salvation is for all people, and so all people are the same, when it comes to Christian acts of mercy and charity. Notice that the Samaritan doesn't ask the wounded man who or what he is; he simply helps him

to the best of his ability. The teaching of Sirach has been superseded by the teaching of Jesus.

Note the behaviour of the first two travellers to see the wounded man. They are described as a priest and a Levite. The Levites assisted in temple worship, so both these men are ministers in the temple. We might attribute their actions to cruelty, but they were probably just as trapped by the Jewish rules as the young man was. For to touch what they likely thought was a dead body would render them unclean for temple worship. They also show us that Jesus is bringing a new way, for just as Jesus did not hesitate to touch lepers, they would have been able to help the wounded man without fear for themselves, if they followed Jesus.

Jesus' final instructions to the young man, "Go and do likewise," would be impossible for him to follow if he kept his Jewish laws. But Jesus is upsetting all that. The new way has arrived. A new covenant is being formed, one based not on following rules, but on faith in God.

And are we not all controlled by rules? There are rules of the road, criminal laws, endless regulations in our modern world. And rules are necessary, but if they become ends in themselves, then they become a problem. I thank God that the rules of our faith are simple: put your faith in Jesus, and be imitators of him. To follow Jesus' "rules", you have only to believe in God and worship only him, and serve God through serving your fellow human beings, whatever or wherever they are. Samaritan or Jew, Maori or Pakeha or Pacifica, all are our brothers and sisters, all around the world. This is what Jesus asks of the young man, and what he asks of us. Thanks be to God. Amen.