

July 14, 2019

Luke 10: 25-37

Prayer: Dear God, We ask your participation in the bringing of your Word this morning. Please bring freshness and energy to this familiar story. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Needful Things

I am a big believer in the separation of church and state. But one thing I think we've lost as Bible classes and religion classes have been removed from public schools and even universities is biblical literacy.

And biblical literacy is important to be an educated person, not just a religious person.

Of course, I'd like to see us become educated about the Islamic Koran and the Hindu and Ba'hai and Buddhist scriptures as well. As our world becomes more complex, we need to know what drives other people, what makes them think in the patterns they do.

Next week, our worship service will be part of the Tour of Faiths. That means we may have visitors from other faiths join us for worship, lunch and then a time of questions.

But what I'm talking about today is our own biblical literacy – or lack thereof.

Jay Leno used to do a piece on his late-night show in which he stopped people on the street and asked them *Who led Israel out of Egypt?* And, *Who are the four gospel writers?* They couldn't answer.

Now maybe if he'd stopped people on the streets of Greenville, they could've answered *Moses* and *Matthew, Mark, Luke and John*. But overall, I doubt we're a whole lot better.

Back when I was writing about religion for *The Greenville News*, a state legislator began pushing for the 10 Commandments to be posted in every school in South Carolina. I was also in seminary at the time, and so I knew there was some discrepancy among different religions and different denominations about the way they list the 10 Commandments.

Jews, Orthodox Christians and most Protestants list the second commandment as “Thou shalt not make any graven image.”

Catholics and Lutherans don't have a commandment about graven images. Instead they take our No. 10 – “Thou shalt not covet” – and make it into two separate commandments – “Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife” and “Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's goods.”

Well, this 10-Commandments-in-the-schools thing was all over the state news in 2002. Supportive legislators claimed that this ancient Jewish document should hang beside the Magna Carta, the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution as a historic document.

But there was no disagreement about the wording of those documents. With the 10 Commandments, one's religion affected how one memorized or recited them.

So I called up the legislator who sponsored the bill, explained about the different versions, then asked him, "Exactly whose 10 Commandments would you hang in the public schools?"

There was a lengthy silence, and then he said, "Can I get back to you on that?"

When he called back awhile later, he had an answer: It would be up to each school district. (Can you just see those school board meetings? *OK, everyone for the Jewish and Orthodox Christian version, raise your hand. Everyone for the Catholic and Lutheran version?*)

When I told my editors at the newspaper, they loved it. We ran a story on the front page with the headline: “Say the Ten Commandments – it’s easy – 1, 2 ..., uh oh.”

Despite our sometimes woeful biblical illiteracy, there are some Bible stories that have made their way into popular culture. There are some stories so well known that you don’t have to be a Christian or a Jew to understand the reference, to get it when a metaphor depends on knowing the story. At least, I think that is still true.

Adam and Eve.

The great flood and Noah’s ark.

The tumblin’ walls of Jericho.

Lot’s wife turning into a pillar of salt.

Daniel in the lion’s den.

Jesus walking on water.

And the Good Samaritan.

The story of the Good Samaritan is so well-known, in fact, that we have what we call a Good Samaritan law. That is, if you are an organization trying

to do something good for people – as the Good Samaritan did – you are offered some protection against lawsuits.

The danger, ironically, is that sometimes we know these stories so well that we assume we know everything they have to say. But maybe we don't. Maybe we don't.

Mark and Matthew both tell about a man who asked Jesus a question: “**Which commandment is the first of all?**” (Mark 12: 28) or “**Which commandment in the law is the greatest?**” (Matthew 22: 35) And in both cases, Jesus answered with those two commandments we know so well: “**Love the Lord you God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind**” and the second, “**Love your neighbor as yourself.**”

But Luke, and only Luke, follows this exchange with the parable of the Good Samaritan. Let's take a look at Luke's version, and see if there might be something there that we've not seen before. **READ Luke 10: 25-37.**

25 Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. ‘Teacher,’ he said, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ ²⁶He said to him, ‘What is written in the law? What do you read there?’

²⁷He answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.' ²⁸And he said to him, 'You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.'

²⁹ But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'

³⁰Jesus replied, 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead.

³¹Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.

³²So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

³³But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. ³⁴He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him.

³⁵The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend."

³⁶Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' ³⁷He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'

Now I'm going to make an assumption here. I'm going to assume that you've heard umpteen sermons and umpteen squared Sunday school lessons on this passage. So I'm not going to talk about the self-righteous religious leaders or the despised Samaritans. I'm not going to talk about prejudice and hypocrisy, and about how everyone we meet is our potential neighbor.

We have talked in here before about how a parable can have many different facets. We hold them up to the light as we would a prism, and can see more than one color, more than one point, more than one truth, in many of them.

I think the most obvious and correct point *is* the way we usually read the Good Samaritan – that our real neighbor just might be the one we least suspect. The despised minority who behaved honorably while the respected religious leaders did not.

But *how* did the Samaritan love his neighbor? That's what we're going to look at today.

"He bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' "

The Samaritan did exactly what was necessary to take care of a beaten, naked, half-dead man – no more and no less. He didn't feed him. He didn't preach to him. He didn't go after the robbers. He didn't report the robbery to the authorities.

He did exactly what the beaten man needed.

When I came to Triune 14 years ago this summer, I felt like a tidal wave of need was washing over me. Every day people wanted to talk. And every single one of those conversations ended with, "And so I need a box of groceries. And so I need a night in a motel. I need medicine. I need a coat. I

need a blanket. I need gas. I need kerosene. I need soap. A razor. Deodorant. A bus ticket.”

At first, I tried to meet those needs. I ran up and down those stairs from food pantry to linen closet to clothes closet 50 times a day.

I remember going home one Sunday night and telling Vince, “They didn’t need to hire a pastor. They needed a Bi-Lo stock boy.”

But very quickly I saw that those groceries, those nights of shelter, those coats, those blankets, that kerosene didn’t fix anything. Not anything at all.

I was not caring for those people nearly as effectively as the Samaritan cared for the beaten man, because I was not addressing what was really wrong.

All those needs that people were assuring me were the real needs were only symptoms of the real need. And that real need was freedom from alcohol or drug abuse. That real need was help for a mental illness or disability. That real need was a chance to become part of a loving community.

As soon as I realized that, I hired David Gay to begin offering people the real help they needed. A chance to end addiction.

For those who accepted that help and went into treatment, who began attending Narcotics Anonymous or Alcoholics Anonymous, their lives were

transformed. Many got clean and sober, re-established relationships with their families and got housing. Some you see here, volunteering and showing very obviously by their energy and their smiles and their attitudes that their lives have changed.

Then it was time to see what else was needed. It was time to go back and settle up with the innkeeper. And we made mistakes.

We added a furniture room so people could get couches and chairs and coffeemakers. We had adult and children's clothes closets, where people could get hundreds of dollars worth of free clothing. And we found that while everyone was glad to come in and get free stuff, it didn't accomplish anything toward goal setting or moving toward self-sufficiency.

So we got rid of all that and went back to the drawing board. We added medical care, case management, mental health counseling, legal aid, art, Playback Café. We added Round Table and Triune Circles. We invited people to join our church community. We invited them to serve each other.

Because we think belonging, being part of God's community, is the real issue, the real need.

No more, no less.

All the scholars I read say that Jesus' parable about the Good Samaritan didn't actually answer the lawyer's question: *Who is my neighbor?* Instead, the parable gives a picture of an extraordinarily good neighbor in action.

The scholars are quite right. But the parable at least alludes to the possibility that our neighbor can be ... anyone. Our neighbor can be ... everyone. Anyone and everyone in need is our neighbor. Anyone and everyone willing to help is our neighbor.

And one reflection we can see through that prism of the parable is the necessity of correctly identifying our neighbor's actual need, not a symptom.

Tara Westover was born in 1986. She grew up on a mountain in Idaho to parents who were fundamentalist Mormons.

They believed that the end times were coming, and they stockpiled weapons and food and supplies. They did not send their seven children to school. They claimed they were home schooling them, but they didn't.

Instead, Tara's father worked them in his very dangerous junk business. One of her brothers was severely burned. Another got a head injury. Tara had a steel beam slice her leg. Her father eventually was in an explosion that melted half his face.

One of Tara's older brothers was physically abusive to his sisters, and the parents chose not to see it – even when the girls told them.

Out of that household, not surprisingly, four children never got high school diplomas. They stayed near the family home, financially dependent on the family business. Very surprisingly, three escaped through higher education.

Tara and two of her brothers earned doctorates, as she tells in her 2018 memoir, *Educated*. Though she first set foot in a classroom at 17, she went on to become a visiting fellow at Harvard and got a Ph.D. from Cambridge in England.

I had heard a good deal about Tara's book before I read it this summer. And it is truly excellent. But more than education, it's about the pull her family had on her.

As the reader, you want her to cut ties with them. It was physically dangerous for her to be around that abusive brother. It was emotionally dangerous for her to be around her father and mother.

Yet, she kept going back. From college at Brigham Young, from England, from Harvard, from England again. She kept returning to that mountain in Idaho.

It was obvious that Tara Westover needed a formal education. It was less obvious that she needed her family.

I hope that the contact with outsiders and the writing of the memoir has helped her make peace with the loss.

Certainly, we are not always the best judge of what we need, or what our neighbor needs. What constitutes the oil and bandages, the ride to the inn, the payment for an innkeeper's care. What is a needed thing, and what is extraneous. Or even harmful.

Out of the hundreds of visiting groups we've had here, I don't think there's a single one who has *not* asked, "What should I do when I'm asked for money on the street? Or at the interstate ramp?"

We respond, "Don't give money." The needs of a panhandler will not be met by cash for drugs or alcohol. That will only extend the problem. The true need is stability, sobriety, friendship – at a place like Triune or United Ministries or Miracle Hill or Salvation Army or other of our partners.

It's a good thing for us to look deeper, to look beyond words and requests to see the need at the root. With God's guidance and wisdom, we can

provide the oil and the bandages. We can provide a ride to the inn. We can set a beaten traveler on the road back home.

Amen.