Who is my Neighbour?

Sermon, February 4, 2024 – Betty Pries
Credence & Co.

Luke 10: 25 – 37 Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” He 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 neighbour as yourself.” And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbour?” Jesus 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. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He 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. 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.’ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

For most of the first 29 years of my life I lived in the city of Winnipeg. The city is beautiful in so many ways: The winters are gloriously sunny. There is always a waterway nearby. And maybe because everyone seems to know each other, the city is known for its kindness. But there is another, less pleasant history of the city of my childhood. Winnipeg was a city of deep social divides. Anglophones were on top. Below them, people were stacked into a caste system based on their culture of origin. Ukrainians came under Italians. Italians under French. French under English. And below all of those of European origin were people of African or Indigenous ancestry. While there were relatively few Black people living in Winnipeg during my childhood, the racism against the many Indigenous people who lived in the city was openly visible.

I am pleased to say that Winnipeg has made great strides. Despite its history of racism, it is also a city with a penchant for justice movements. It is, after all, the city of the great general strike in 1929. Slowly, and sometimes with more steps backward than forward, the city is reshaping itself.

Over the last few years, there have been multiple moments of truth for Canadians. The discovery of graves around Indigenous Residential Schools. The killing of a Muslim family in London. The Black Lives Matter movement. We read news of horrific harms and are deeply grieved. We promise to do better. We promise not to look away. But what is actually required of us to build a society that is truly equitable?

Many years ago, when I began really leaning into the history of anti-Black racism in North America, I was saddened to learn that every move toward justice has been matched by a countermovement of continued injustice. I want to observe this reality in the United States for a moment for the simple reason that some things are easier to see there than here.

In the 1860s, slavery officially came to an end in the United States… The end of slavery brought about a period known as "Reconstruction." This was 12 years of flourishing Black businesses, Black doctors, Black communities, all building new, hopeful post-slavery communities. Then there was pushback. The South received tacit permission from the North to institute segregation and anti-Black oppression. This brought with it profound injustice, killing and horror for Black communities.

In the 1960s, the civil rights movement pulled the veil from the eyes of many Americans and ushered in an end to segregation. Again, there was pushback, this time in the form of ongoing exclusion and in the form of a war on drugs and the anti-abortion movement, both of which were thinly veiled strategies to keep Black people down.

I have been teaching equity workshops for almost 10 years now. Knowing the history of pushback against equity movements, when the Black Lives Matter marches swept North America, I wondered – would the pushback come again? If so, in what form? Well, it came. The anti-woke movement alongside anti-woke laws have been swift in their efforts to maintain a social class hierarchy that ensures white people remain at the top of the North American caste structure.

While it is easy to become discouraged, equity movements depend on our collective capacity to maintain hope in the face of sorrow. They depend on us deepening our own commitment to the fundamental truth that each person is made in the image of God.

To consider what this means for us, I'd like to revisit an old and beloved parable from the New Testament. You know the passage – it is the story of the Good Samaritan. When you heard the text read earlier today, with whom did you identify? The Samaritan, Priest, Levite, the wounded man or the thieves?

Before we consider with whom you identified, I would like to offer a bit of grace to the Priest and Levite. We often think of the Priests and the Levites as the same as the Scribes and the Pharisees. But they are not the same. Jesus, we should remember, rarely goes after the Priests and the Levites. In fact, the Priests and the Levites were not really people of power at all. Nor were they wealthy.

In addition to their commitment in the Temple, most Priests and Levites had to take on other jobs to make ends meet. Plus, many Priests and Levites were not based in Jerusalem. These men travelled long distances to fulfill their yearly duty in the Temple. It is likely that the two men in our story are on their way home. Why did these men not stop to help? There are many reasons why for them, not stopping makes sense.

Perhaps the men passed by on the other side because they were afraid for their own lives. After all, robbers at that time sometimes placed a fake victim on the side of the road to attract would-be do-gooders, whom they could then easily attack and plunder. In other words, robbers could be lying in wait for just the type of person who might stop to help the injured man.

Or, just as likely, it is possible that the Priest and Levite knew that if they stopped to help an unidentifiable injured man, they would be considered ritually unclean. This means they would be required to spend a significant amount of time purifying themselves upon their return home, leaving their families without an income for even longer than just the lost income associated with their time away in Jerusalem.

For both reasons, for the Priest and the Levite, passing by on the other side makes sense. The two men pass by on the other side to ensure they are not putting themselves and their families at risk.

The people listening to Jesus would have understood the dilemma the men were in – making the parable even more poignant for the listening audience. On the one hand, the crowd sympathizes with the plight of the wounded man. On the other hand, the crowd sympathizes with the Priest and the Levite. It is as though the audience is caught between a

rock and a hard place. By the time the Priest and Levite pass by the wounded man, the dramatic tension in the parable is at its peak.

Now the element of surprise appears, though because we know the parable so well, it is quite possible that we miss the extent of the surprise. At this point in the parable, we should imagine the crowd leaning forward or hanging on to the edge of their seats. In this dramatic moment of high tension, Jesus states the following: But a Samaritan while traveling came near him. *But a Samaritan while traveling came near him.* This is the parable's big surprise.

In a way, the tension in the story is resolved in this moment, but it is resolved in a manner that raises more questions than it answers. On the one hand, the presence of a Samaritan is a relief – Samaritans were not held to the same purity laws as the Priests or the Levites – so for the Samaritan to touch an unidentifiable and wounded man is sort of ok. On the other hand, the hero of the story is an outcast – a Samaritan whose cultural group at the time was intensely disliked by those in the listening crowd. This puts the listener in a quandary. Is the presence of the Samaritan good or bad news?

The fact that the hero of this story is an outcast is shocking in ways that we can hardly imagine. Unless of course we think about those whom we regard as other today.

If we allow ourselves to place into the role of the Samaritan those who are outcast today or those that we find distasteful, or those with whom we disagree, and if we place ourselves into this story in a manner that allows us to experience the discomfort this creates, then we come close to the experience of the first Century listeners.

This brings us to the question I asked you earlier: With whom do we identify in this story? Some of us will feel guilty, knowing that we identify with the anti-heroes of the story, the Priest and the Levite. My hunch, however, is that most of us identify with the hero of the story, the Samaritan – or at least we want to. After all, from our early childhood through to our adulthood we have heard Jesus say, "Go and do likewise" and we have understood this to mean that we must be like the Samaritan.

It is good to identify with the Samaritan. This man, after all, does what the Priest and the Levite did not do. He sanitizes and binds the injured man's wounds, and he gives the man the back of his donkey while he *walks* beside them.

Then at the Inn, the Samaritan saves the wounded man again. It was common to throw people into prison if they could not pay their debts. The Samaritan has no idea how wealthy or poor the wounded man is. By offering to repay the cost of the man's care, the Samaritan saves the man from the risk of being thrown in prison should he be unable to pay his debt

to the innkeeper upon his recovery. The level of mercy shown by the Samaritan is simply incredible. For the listener, it is like the cup from Psalm 23 that just keeps overflowing with mercy.

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It is good for us to identify with the Samaritan. Indeed, we can trace so many of the church's impulses to do good back to this story. The problem with identifying with the Samaritan, however, is that we come out as the heroes in the story. Is this problematic? Should we be concerned when we cast ourselves in the role of the hero?

I wonder – what happens to us when we see ourselves as the type of people who save others rather than the type of people who need saving?

This is especially problematic for those of us who, because of the accident of our birth, are in a place of being privileged or powerful. The Samaritan, now, is not associated with those who are outcast but instead he is associated with those who are powerful or privileged. When this occurs, we lose the point of the story. The point is that the outcast plays the hero, not the privileged person.
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Of course, the categories of outcast and privileged can create an artificial binary. There are many ways in which we can be both – both the privileged and the underprivileged. We may experience a sense of being lesser than in one area of our life while still participating in the systemic realities that contribute to the marginalization of others. This was also true of the people listening to Jesus when the parable was first told. They too were both privileged and underprivileged: They lived under oppressive Roman rule making them underprivileged; yet they also nurtured an intense disregard for Samaritans, for those who were differently-abled, those who committed adultery or were divorced – really anyone from whom they were different in some way.

With regard to our passage for today, I wonder what happens when we identify not with the Samaritan but instead, with the wounded man. It is, after all, what the 1st Century audience would have done. Consider for a moment the listening audience – they would have identified with the "man going down from Jerusalem", the man who was wounded. They would not have identified with the Samaritan.

If this is true, then is it possible that when Jesus says, "go and do likewise" he is not telling the lawyer to become like the Samaritan but instead, he is telling the lawyer to become like the wounded man. Let us consider this for a moment: It is possible that Jesus is saying, *Go and become as vulnerable as the man left naked and bleeding at the side of the road. Go and become powerless so that you can experience the powerful goodness of the one who differs*

from you. Go and allow yourself to be cared for by a person you find distasteful. Go and let the outcast be the hero.

What if "go and do likewise" means, "go and allow yourself to be the one who is weak?"

There is, of course, another, perhaps more troubling interpretation of this text. We know that while we are sometimes the Samaritan, sometimes the wounded, and sometimes the passersby, it is also true that we are sometimes the thieves, the ones who have done harm to others, either intentionally or unwittingly, either consciously or unconsciously, either personally or because of the people groups with whom we identify. This is especially true for those of us who have benefitted from power, privilege and the personal and structural prejudices that define our communities.

Consider the protests related to Black Lives Matter, the cry of pain related to the discovery of children's graves around former Residential Schools, those pain of members of the LGBTQ community who have been deeply wounded by exclusion from faith communities.

What happens when we identify with the thieves in this story – with the ones who have done harm? How do we encounter the text when we have been the ones who beat a traveller and left him wounded on the side of the road? What does it mean for us to hear *go and do likewise*?

I invite you to close your eyes and just ponder these questions for a while: When we have been the thieves, what does it mean for us to hear the words, *go and do likewise*?

At a minimum, when Jesus says *go and do likewise* and lifts up the heroism of the Samaritan, he invites us to put an end to thievery.

Over these last years, we have seen so many of our communities become divided. We have taken hard stances against one another, often we have judged rather than listened, we have spoken in ways that have harmed even as we seek to undo harm, we have responded out of fear and frustration to one another, and at least in some cases, we have deepened rather than upended the marginalization alive in our communities.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is more than a sweet Sunday School story. It is a radical word to us, challenging the assumptions of those listening to this story, both then and now. The parable challenges the biases we hold about one another, it forces us to consider how we engage with one another, and it invites us to consider anew what it means to be a neighbour.

In this parable… could Jesus be asking us to identify as the wounded man on the side of the road who is saved by the one we see as the outcast or by the one we see as among those

who need saving? Could we be asked to identify with the Priest and Levite who – by all accounts, legitimately pass by for their own protection – but nonetheless leave the wounded among us to suffer? Could we be asked to identify as the thieves who create the harm in the first place? Or, could we be asked to become like the Samaritan, the outsider who gives grace abundantly, even to those who disregard him?

When Jesus says, *Go and do likewise,* he invites us to come close both to our vulnerability and our strength, both to our nakedness and our willingness to clothe the naked. The text invites us to wrestle with our guilt – whether we are the passersby, the thieves, or those in the crowd whose biases and assumptions are exposed as the story is told.

There is, of course, one more way to engage in this story. The Samaritan, after all, is the Jesus figure in this story. If this is so, then when Jesus says to the lawyer to *"go and do likewise,"* it is also possible to hear Jesus say: *Go and allow yourself to be loved by me, to be transformed and strengthened and cared for by me, to be anointed with oil by me.*

What would it mean for us to have an encounter with God's presence where we know, deep in our bones, that we – we – were the ones being carried on the back of a donkey, as Jesus walked alongside us?

In whatever way you encounter the story today, the words of invitation remain the same: *Go and do likewise.* Get in touch with your vulnerability. Recognise your brokenness. Become vulnerable like the wounded man. Allow yourself to be healed by those who are outcast, by the people you find distasteful. Recognise Jesus in the people you dislike.

Go and do likewise. Get in touch with your vulnerability. Recognise your brokenness. Become vulnerable like the wounded man. Allow yourself to be healed by God's great love and by God's transforming and healing power.

Go and do likewise. Become like the Samaritan. Attend to the wounds of the people around you. Allow yourself to become the hands and feet of Jesus in a world so much in need of healing.

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And the lawyer answered Jesus: "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 neighbour as yourself."
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If we look at the grammatical construction of the original Greek in which these words were written, we see that to love God is to love one's neighbour and to love one's neighbour is to love God. *To love God is to love one's neighbour and to love one's neighbour is to love God.*

It is one love. ...It is one love.

Go and do likewise and you shall live.

AMEN.