



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
The Reverend Zack Nyein, Senior Associate Rector

The Good Samaritan: Not an Anomaly

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, July 10, 2022
The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
Based on Deuteronomy 30:9-14; Colossians 1:1-14; Luke 10:25-37*

*Jesu, Jesu fill us with your love
Teach us how to serve
The neighbors we have from you.*

The Parable of the Good Samaritan is one of the most familiar stories Jesus told, which makes it difficult to preach on. It has influenced society well beyond the church. The state of New York has a Good Samaritan law, which allows people to call 911, without fear of arrest, if they overdose on drugs or alcohol and need help.

In this instance, the “Good Samaritans” are the first responders, including the police—who indeed evoke a mixed public opinion. There are “good cops” and “bad cops” after all, and the default perception varies across individuals and communities. A young white boy lost in an amusement park may be comforted, while a young Black man pulled over for a traffic violation may panic. This has always been true, and in a post George Floyd world, it’s something we can’t ignore.

Not unlike that terrible Friday, Jesus himself never called the Samaritan “Good.” This moniker is the church’s invention and one that might well make Jesus wary. In our language, the word “good,” when applied to certain identities and affiliations, reflects a perceived anomaly. Democrats, for instance, might refer to a friend across the aisle as a “Good Republican” and vis versa, suggesting that in the eye of the beholder, such a thing is rare. Likewise, an Episcopalian might reassure a non-Christian friend that we are the “good kind” of Christians in a world where reports of Christians causing harm seem all too common.

In a more insidious example, the phrase, “one of the good ones” has long been used to describe people of color, especially Black folk, perceived as successful or non-threatening to the status quo. As an American-born person of Asian descent, I can personally attest to the frequency with which this mindset has fostered the myth of the so called “model minority.” If you haven’t heard of it, Google it. It’s a thing.

What it sounds like is people—even good friends saying or thinking—well, Zack, aren’t you “basically white” because you don’t have an accent and can easily blend in. It’s usually meant as a sort of wayward compliment, but it hurts us all, because it suggests that whiteness is not only the norm but the ideal; and conforming to the dominant culture is something to be rewarded. It suggests that our differences, racial and otherwise, are something to be downplayed and eradicated.

Though we are currently in Luke, you may remember a parallel story in Mark, when a rich young man asks, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit life eternal?” Jesus responds, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.” Well, you and I can call Jesus “good” because Jesus has been revealed to us as God incarnate. But none of us are God. Therefore none of us are “good” like God is

good. We are sinners. Still, our tradition teaches that on a fundamental human level, all of us are good because we were created in the image of our good and gracious God who called us good from the very beginning.

Thus our inherent dignity, worth, and goodness comes from being created, named, and adopted as children of the Most High God and co-heirs with Christ. In Christ, all our other identities are meaningful, but secondary. Meaningful because God's divinity is reflected through our diversity. Secondary, because they are morally neutral: to be Black, white, brown, queer, straight, Samaritan or American makes one inherently neither superior nor inferior, good or bad. This is what we proclaim ritually at baptism when we are joined to Christ in whom there is no male or female, Gentile or Jew, servant or free.

And so Jesus never calls the Samaritan "good," because he's not an anomaly. His goodness, like his sin, is common to every human being, a point that Jesus proves over and over again as he encounters many good and multi-dimensional Samaritans—like the woman at the well in John's Gospel, whose experience of being deeply seen and loved by Jesus causes her to drop her bucket and run back to the village to tell her friends.

Likewise, Luke's Gospel is concerned with the good news of God's Kingdom spreading to the Gentiles and throughout all nations, starting with and foreshadowed by Jesus encounters with the Samaritans, who are neither Gentiles nor Jews, but who are viewed as part of the nation and family of Israel, the Northern tribe, children of Abraham just like their Jewish siblings, but estranged from them through regional differences in religious practice and culture. Whereas the Samaritans centered their worship on Mount Gerizim in the north, the Jews based their worship in the Temple at Jerusalem.

North against South, tribe against tribe. Polarization, enmity, estrangement. Sound familiar? That's the climate in which the story begins. It's where we are as a country today. Last week a poll by the Associated Press reported that 85% of adults in the U.S. think we are headed the wrong direction. Mass shootings, economic tribulation: I don't have to name all our woes. For several weeks now we've been processing the stunning overturn of Roe, the result of decades of rancorous culture wars and vast differences in the interpretation of our American law and constitution, our understandings of when life begins, and views on who deserves access to healthcare.

Today a young expert in the Jewish law meets Jesus on the road to Jerusalem, where Jesus has set his face. It is the right direction, but a difficult road. Jesus is headed towards the cross, towards his own state execution, headed to meet his death when this clever young lawyer comes on scene, asking Jesus about life.

"Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus turns the questioning to him: You're the expert in the law. What does it say? The lawyer responds, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and strength and love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus says, yes. "Do that, and you will inherit eternal life."

Yikes. He knows he's fallen short and will fall short again. So posed with an inconvenient and insurmountable truth, and wanting to justify himself, he creates a loophole, clever lawyer that he is. He asks, "Who is my neighbor?" He realizes that the more he can narrow the bounds of who constitutes neighbor, the more he can widen door to this eternal life without having to change a thing about this life. And he seeks a way of interpreting the law to support it.

Who is my neighbor? If we're honest, the answer is something most of us here have the privilege of being able to engineer for ourselves, to a degree. As soon as I announced I was moving to New York City, everyone naturally asked, "So what neighborhood are you going to live in?" Nowadays, those with means

can choose where to live, where to worship, attend school, and where and with whom to spend their free time, whether in-person or online. There is much to appreciate about that, but in so doing, we may find that those we are surrounded by think, act, and look an awful lot like we do.

Who is my neighbor? Beloved, the bottom line is this: Jesus isn't interested in our carefully curated social spheres. We can choose our neighborhoods but we can't choose our neighbors. Every human being is our neighbor. Whether interpreting law, or interpreting human beings, Jesus invites us to open our hearts to exercise the most compassionate, gracious interpretation imaginable.

Jesus' lifting up of a Samaritan as the hero and exemplar in this story would have been shocking and offensive to Jesus' Jewish audience. When he asks the lawyer, "Which of these was a neighbor to the one in need," the lawyer couldn't even bring himself to say the word "Samaritan." This parable is more than a call to do good works and imitate his neighborly love in stopping to help, providing medical care and lodging, and paying for it out of his own resources—which we should. It also calls us to the deep, spiritual work of recognizing the goodness and humanity in the neighbors we would least expect.

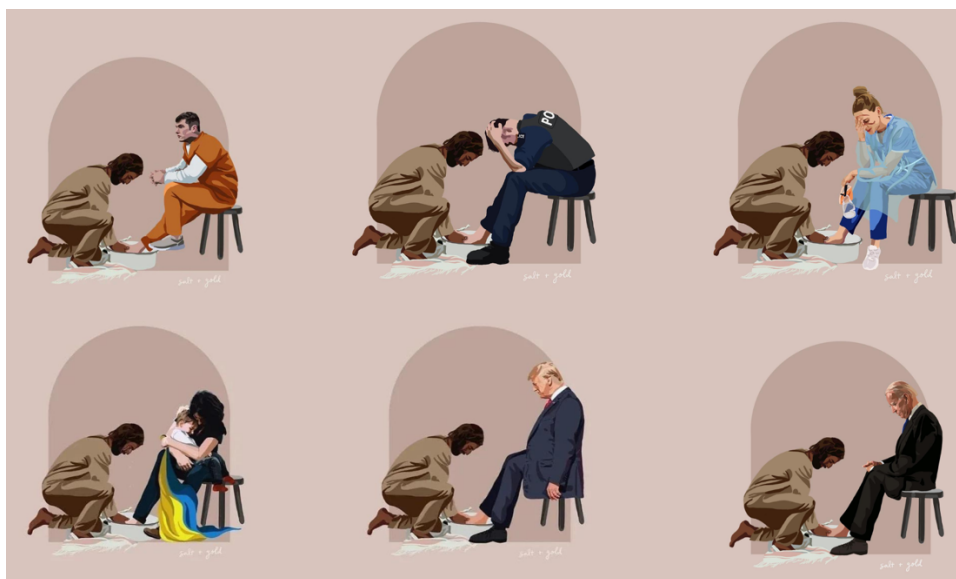
I don't think any of us would be here if we didn't want a taste of that eternal life. Not some pie in the sky, but a life of joy, and peace, and abundance. A life in Christ that is available to us right now. Available to us whenever we give ourselves away for love's sake.

The lawyer had the right answer. The priest and the Levite had the right ritual. The Levite had the right religion. But which one was the neighbor? The one who showed mercy. The one who gave of his time and resources in love for the wellbeing of the one who was suffering.

We still hide behind the same things today in a futile effort to justify ourselves. Our right answers, our resumés, our good theology and politics: all amount to a self-righteousness that can never earn us eternal life. Only love will.

Paul got it right in 1 Corinthians when he wrote that "As for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end." But love never ends.

I'll leave you with these images by Jess Bond's Salt and Gold Collection Footwashing seriesⁱ.



Which one breaks your heart? Which one is most difficult for you?

As we are nourished at this table once more, I pray God will give us eyes to see and hands to strive for a world where God's goodness and love are not anomalies but around every corner, perhaps just waiting for us to cross the road and come near, as he comes near to us in this meal with compassion and grace abundant. Even when we fall short—and we will—his love and mercy remain.

Amen.

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For information about St. Bart's and its life of faith and mission
write us at central@stbarts.org, call 212-378-0222, or visit stbarts.org
325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022

ⁱ <https://www.instagram.com/saltandgoldcollection/?hl=en?>