

03-09-2025 Words of Worship

Morning Prayer --

This morning our prayer will include Verney and Janice Voth and the extended Voth family. Verney's brother-in-law, James Parker, died early yesterday morning at his home in Buhler. He was the husband of Verney's sister LaVera and had been diagnosed recently with lymphoma.

Loving God, we thank you for your creativity and appreciation of beauty that we can see in all that you have made. We see it in the flowers and trees that are sprouting and budding. We see your love and care in the balance and resilience of nature. We ask that those whose work and passion is to care for the earth would be inspired to keep working in spite of sometimes discouraging circumstances and lack of support. We believe that you've asked us to steward the earth and care for its resources, so we'll try to be faithful to that call.

O God, we pray for Steve and Sandy as they continue in Phoenix for a bit longer. Thank you for the ways you've been present with them this month. We ask for your continued love and care for them as they think about and prepare to make the journey back home.

We pray for Verney and Janice, for LaVera and the rest of the family as they grieve James' death and begin to adjust to life without him. Grant them your comfort and peace.

As we remember the Civil Rights Movement and people like John Lewis, James Reeb, Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Baker and so many other foot soldiers and peaceful justice seekers who marched and sang and prayed we thank you for their lives and their courage. We ask for the kind of faith and faithfulness that they demonstrated, that we could learn from their work and carry it on as it's not done yet.

O God, we think of your children around the world who are longing for your peace with justice in their lives and their situations. We pray especially for our Ukrainian friends here in Kansas and for those who are living in this country with the trust that they would be protected and are now feeling betrayed and fearful. Be with others in similar circumstances – those from Afghanistan and other places. Bring your Spirit of Comfort and Peace and help us to know how we might be supportive and helpful to them.

Be with us, God, through this worship service – may you be praised and glorified and may the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Offering – For all that we have and all that we are, we give you thanks, O Lord. Bless these gifts that are returned to you and for you. Amen.

Message – Pastor Lois Harder

Priests, Levites and Israelites... not Samaritans! Luke 10:25-37

We know this story as the parable of the Good Samaritan and most of us have known it since we were children. We all know what it means to be a “good Samaritan” – to be kind and helpful to strangers, to stop and help if there’s someone along the road who’s hurt or stranded, maybe even to save someone’s life. There are hospitals from coast to coast named after this character – the Medstar Good Samaritan Hospital in Baltimore, and the Good Samaritan Hospital in Los Angeles. And right nearby in Wichita GraceMed operates the Good Samaritan Family Clinic on E. 13th Street. There’s even a Good Samaritan Donkey Sanctuary in Clarence Town, Australia – yes, a place where kindness and care is shown to the very beasts of burden that carried the wounded man in our story to the inn.

Maybe you’ve heard the adage that religion is supposed to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable? This story certainly lives up to that expectation. And one of my favorite Bible scholars, Amy Jill Levine says that “parables are NOT children’s stories or banal statements of the obvious.” She goes on, “If you read or listen to one of Jesus’ parables and your response is, ‘Ohhhh, what a lovely little story’, chances are you’ve missed the message entirely.” Let’s look again at this familiar story.

Much of what I’m sharing with you this morning comes from Amy Jill Levine. She is the Distinguished Professor of New Testament and Jewish Studies at Hartford International University for Religion and Peace. She is a practicing Jew and a highly respected scholar of New Testament studies. So she brings a certain clarity and expertise about Jesus’ Judaism to his life and teachings. I’m also sharing with you some new things that I learned from Mary Schertz’s recently published commentary on the book of Luke. Mary taught Greek and New Testament at the Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, IN for almost 30 years; she is also a highly respected and wise biblical scholar.

The first character we meet in the story is a legal expert, a lawyer. And he comes to Jesus with a good, and valid legal question. In the Common English Bible from which Lynel read us the story, the lawyer’s question is translated, “What must I do to gain eternal life?” In the NRSV and other translations the word is inherit - “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” As many good teachers do, Jesus answered his question with another question – actually, two questions. “What is written in the Law?” And, “How do you *interpret* it?” Of course, the fellow was an expert, so he could answer Jesus’ questions quickly and easily. He drew from both Deuteronomy 6:5 “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” And from Leviticus 19:18, “...love your neighbor as yourself.” “Good answer!” Jesus assures him... but doesn’t leave it there. He adds, “Now DO it and you will live.”

But that wasn’t quite specific enough for the man. And the reason he couldn’t let it go was because of how he was interpreting the Law, and this was what Jesus was getting at. As Amy Jill Levine says, the Jewish law is about love. Love God and love people. Love your neighbor AND love the stranger among you because you were once strangers. Every Jew knows that, she says.

But the man was trying to interpret the law in a way that would prove that he was right, that he was worthy of eternal life, that he had “earned it”. He wanted to use the law to justify himself.

But, as Mary Schertz says, his job, and our job, when we read scripture is to justify God. Another way of saying it might be that when we read the Bible our interpretation of it needs to lead to our understanding of what God is trying to do and be in the world through us. If the lawyer had truly *understood* the intent of the law he wouldn’t have needed to ask the clarifying question, “Who IS my neighbor?” But he was trying to justify himself, to prove that he was right.

And so, in response to the legal experts’ second question, Jesus told this parable. Now, first of all, a few points of interest regarding Jewish law. We’ve often heard that at least part of the reason that the Priest and the Levite passed by the half-dead man was that the purity law forbade them from coming into contact with a corpse. “Nonsense!” says Dr. Levine. (She’s very spunky!) Jewish law stresses the importance of LIFE and since they didn’t know whether the man was dead or alive the law would have prescribed their helping him. Also, the purity law was only for when they were going UP to Jerusalem – to go into the Temple. The text says they were going down from Jerusalem to Jericho. They were moving away from the Temple, so the purity law would not have applied.

Dr. Levine says that the best explanation she’s ever heard for why the Priest and the Levite didn’t stop came from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He said something like this. “Now I’m not sure exactly what happened that day, but in my imagination it’s possible that the Priest and the Levite were afraid – because there are bandits, robbers on the road. The Priest and the Levite asked, ‘If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?’ But the Samaritan asked, ‘If I don’t stop to help this man, what will happen to HIM?’ King went on to say, ‘If I don’t stop to help the sanitation workers in Memphis, what will happen to them?’” And we know what happened to him, because there are bandits on the road. Fear is real.

Here’s another interesting detail about this parable. “In Judaism”, Dr. Levine explains, “there is the rule of 3. Every first-century Jew knew that if you were telling a story and there was a Priest (a descendent of Moses’ brother, Aaron), and a Levite (descended from the tribe of Levi) then the third party in the story would have to be an Israelite. Because those were the 3 groups that all Jews were a part of – the Priests, the Levites and the Israelites. It’s like this”, she said, “I’ll say the first two words and you fill in the third... Larry, Mo, and _____ (Curly). Father, Son, and _____ (HS). To go from Priest to Levite to Samaritan, for the first century Jew would have been like hearing Larry, Mo and Hitler or Father, Son and Satan. It was absolutely unthinkable!” It was not just provocative or disturbing, it was deeply offensive.

In antiquity, the Samaritans were THE ENEMY! They were not the oppressed victims. They were hostile and made life miserable for the Jews. This story was not known as the parable of the good Samaritan to its first hearers. It was known as the parable of the man who fell among the robbers. In modern times we’ve come to think of ourselves as “good Samaritans”, but the point Jesus was driving home for the lawyer, and for all who have ears to hear, was that we are often the wounded person by the side of the road wondering who will help us in this fearful and dire

situation and as the Samaritan approaches us we might think, “I’d rather die than have to acknowledge one of THEM helped me.”

Jesus is asking us to recognize that the face of the enemy is also in the image and likeness of God. He’s asking us to acknowledge that everyone is a human being and no matter who it is, they have the potential to save us. For this story to be called “The Good Samaritan” only reveals the deep prejudice that early Jews had against Samaritans. It’s saying that among all the people in this particular ethnic group there was this one, good one.

Jesus told the story of a hated Samaritan who behaved more like someone who honored the heart of the Jewish law than the Jewish Priest or Levite. This was someone who honored and justified God with his compassion and love – and he paid a high price in order to do it! As Mary Schertz notes, “He was lavish with his oil, wine and silver – he basically wrote the innkeeper a blank check for the man’s care.”

As I re-read this familiar parable this week and read these two wise women’s comments about it, like a good student, I tried to enter into the story and think about where I find myself in it – which character or characters do I relate to? I soon realized that I would need to make a confession. As much as I want to see myself as the helpful Samaritan, the painful, truth is that the Samaritan is probably the last character I would find myself in.

In these times when there is so much division, name-calling, fear, anger, threats, meanness...I am likely most clearly reflected in the lawyer, the one who wants to be assured of my correctness, sorely tempted to read and interpret scripture in ways that I think might guarantee my salvation. Because I see myself as being so different than those I hear doing the name-calling, creating the fear and angst, making the threats, being the bullies, I see myself as the lawyer who doesn’t seem to think that he needs to receive help from *anyone* and especially not from anyone I so vehemently disagree with.

This week I needed to hear again that we don’t inherit or earn life with God. That’s a gift of pure grace. But my humanity, my pride, my need to “prove myself” – almost always gets in the way of realizing and accepting that grace.

Where do you find yourself in the story? Do you relate most to the Priest and the Levite – fearful because there are bandits and robbers on the road? Maybe you’re most like the wounded guy in the ditch – needing help and wondering who is going to help you? But pretty sure it *won’t* be someone from THAT group! Or, maybe you find yourself in the Samaritan, the exception to the widely held bias that says you won’t stop to offer help, but you do.

In the end, the lawyer knew the right answer to Jesus’ question, “Which one of the three was a neighbor to the man who encountered the thieves?”

“The one who demonstrated mercy toward him,” came the reply.

“Go. And do likewise.”

Resources:

https://www.google.com/search?q=Amy+Jill+Levine+on+Samaritans&rlz=1C1CHBF_enUS880US886&oq=amy&gs_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUqBggAEEUYOzIGCAAQRRg7MgYIARBFGDkyCggCEC4YsQMYgAQyDQgDEC4YgwEYsQMYgAQyCggEEC4YsQMYgAQyBggFEEUYPDIGCAYQRRg8MgYIBxBFGDzSAQgzNDgxajBqN6gCALACAA&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8#fpstate=ive&vld=cid:d21d1014,vid:rn_GpV5dbFc,st:0

Go and Do Likewise: Lessons from the parable of the Good Samaritan by Amy-Jill Levine, September 17, 2014 in Faith, The Living Word – September 29, 2014 Issue

Who is my enemy? The parable of the good Samaritan by Andrew Perriman 28 December, 2023
<https://www.postost.net/2023/12/who-my-enemy-parable-good-smaritan>

Anabaptist Community Bible, Luke 10:25-37 and *Believers Church Bible Commentary* on Luke by Mary H. Schertz

I Bring the Voices of My People: A Womanist Vision for Racial Reconciliation by Chanequa Walker-Barnes

Benediction –

Go now in courageous love. Love God and love people. Amen.