

Sunday, July 14, 2019 – Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
“Good Samaritan”

Luke 10: 25-37

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Story Framed Structure
Adapted from CJ

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, amen.

I'm not big into tennis, or volleyball, but I know enough to remember that one of the reasons I wasn't very good in elementary school gym class at those games is because learning to serve well was really hard. How much more so in everyday life. Life in Christ involves service. It means serving others. It happens on the path of everyday living. It is directed to those who we encounter on that path—our neighbors. Serving is important – and serving is hard.

Our Gospel text today finds Jesus being questioned by a lawyer. Not just any lawyer – an expert on the law as it pertains to religion and the Hebrew practice thereof. As you might expect of any good lawyer, the question asked is filled with potential pitfalls that the lawyer hopes to leverage. Then, all too often those pitfalls turn into pratfalls on the part of the person made to look foolish in how they answer. Let's journey along as Jesus puts the lawyer to the test instead.

Jesus starts by answering the question “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” with another question – “What is written in the Law?” They agree that the law is summed up as this: “You shall love the Lord your God . . . and your neighbor as yourself.” Trading in questions (the best way to get the other on the defensive) the lawyer asked, “Who is my neighbor?” To answer, Jesus tells a story.

A man is traveling the winding road through the rocky desert. He is accosted by thugs who attack, assault, rob, and beat him. They leave him as if he were road kill. Later he is approached by two men:

First, a priest, fresh from leading worship at the temple, sees the bloodied, lifeless looking guy. Is he alive? We don't know – maybe, maybe not. But if he were dead, to touch him would be taboo. The priest would experience ceremonial defilement and so lose his priestly prerogatives for a lengthy period of time. This was too messy!

Second, a Levite (a religious worker descended from the priestly tribe of Levi, one of the sons of Jacob) had kept very busy in religious activities. He cleaned the temple and synagogue.

He maintained the holy furniture and vessels. He directed the choirs and musicians. He organized the sacred library. But when he saw the beaten man, he passed by. His duties were many, his responsibilities were large. He was too busy!

You may not be clergy, but you are priests. Every Christian is. Your everyday experiences as parents and spouses, employees or employers, citizens and church members are places where you live as disciples of Jesus, priests who get to talk directly with God. Today Christian discipleship happens in the everyday journey of life, where opportunities to serve arise. But for us, to get involved is oftentimes:

1. Too messy: We hesitate to get involved with people's problems: a coworker divorcing, a neighbor whose kids are unruly, a teen who looks odd, an old person with a house run down, a sick friend.

2. Too busy: To help and serve others takes time. We've got life scheduled to the minute. We have no margin, so we can't fit the needs of others into our schedules. We've got other obligations and deadlines.

A fascinating study took place in 2015 at Princeton Theological Seminary. Researchers wanted to test the "Good Samaritan hypothesis. Here's what happened:

"In their study, Darley and Batson examined the behavior of Princeton Theological Seminary students. A student would arrive for the study, and he would be given a first set of instructions. As far as the participant was concerned, this was a study on the "vocational careers of seminary students," and they were being asked to prepare a 3 – 5 minute talk about being a minister.

For half of the students in the study, the talk they were asked to prepare was just about what it means to be a minister and what kinds of jobs involve ministry to some degree. The other half of the students were also given the story of the Good Samaritan, which they would incorporate into their talk. These two versions of the activity were used to get some people really thinking about religious issues related to helping people—shouldn't that make them more likely to help someone if they see that need?

After they worked on their talk for a bit, the assistant would come in and ask the student to finish working in another room because space was tight in the building they were in. The student was given a map pointing them to a building across campus. Sometimes, though, the assistant would say, "It'll be a few minutes before they're ready for you, but you might as well head on over." In other words, there was no rush. Other times, the assistant would say, "The assistant is ready for you, so please go right over" ... a little more rushed. For still other students, the assistant would say, "Oh, you're late. They were expecting you a few minutes ago. We'd better get moving." In other words, *"You'd better hurry up! You're late!"*

Along the way, however, the researchers had staged an emergency, which they refer to in their paper as "the incident" and it's the real point of the study. An actor was "sitting slumped in a doorway, head down, eyes closed, not moving." The actor coughed as the students would walk by him. Basically, it looked like this guy could use some help.

The outcome of all this? Students who were on their way to give a talk on the good Samaritan were no less likely to be helpful than those who were not! In fact several walked right over the guy needing help and then went to give a talk on being a good Samaritan! What really mattered in the research was whether or not the person was in a hurry. Those unhurried were far more prone to help than the ones thinking they were late.

Back to Jesus' story to the lawyer – after the priest and Levite we have a Samaritan come by the dying man. “Samaritan” and “good” seemed a contradiction of terms to this lawyer and anyone else listening in. Samaritans were the hated enemy of Jews, considered half-breeds, traitors, and heretics. So when Jesus introduces this character, quite likely the audience expected him to be a villain (that's how Samaritans were commonly portrayed). Maybe the Samaritan would finish off the injured guy. But Jesus speaks well of Him: he “has compassion.” He rescues the Jewish victim, serves him, and sacrifices for him so that he is cared for.

Having completed the story, Jesus out-lawyers the lawyer: “Which proved to be a neighbor?” The lawyer responded: “The one who showed mercy.” Jesus then directs, “Go do likewise.”

To us Jesus also says, “Go and do likewise.” The problem is, we often don't. The lives of others are too messy! Ours are too busy! We fail to serve. We fail to love our neighbors as ourselves.

But there is one in this account who does—not the fictional Samaritan, but the real-life narrator. Jesus came into this messy world and connected with messed up people—prostitutes, publicans, lepers. More than that, he connected with sinners. He was the “friend of sinners.” He served them—healed, forgave, and released them from the mess of sin and the peril of death.

When you put yourself in this story, sure, you can learn to love your neighbor better, but the point of the story isn't for you to “be more like the Samaritan.” The point is that Jesus, the Good Samaritan came for you the dying guy in the ditch. He serves us sinners! He heals, forgives, and releases us from our sin and its deadly consequences. “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Now, in response, we get to join Christ's mission, and serve in his name. We serve in the messiness and busyness of life. We serve because he first served us.

A man once observed Mother Teresa cleaning the wounds of a leper. He turned away in revulsion and said, "I wouldn't do that for a million dollars." Teresa looked at him and replied, "Neither would I. But I would do it for Christ."

We have been rescued by Christ. He gave his all that we might live. Thus we serve others in the messiness and busyness of life. We do it because He enables it by first doing it for us. We do it for Christ. That's what being Jesus' disciple is all about – enabled by Him and responding in and for Him. In Jesus' name, Amen.