

Hospitality, Part 2: Who I Am in This Story
Sermon on Luke 10:25-37 (9.19 & 9.20.15)
Jennifer M. Hallenbeck

Years ago, in a church I served previously, I was part of a weekly Bible study with several other pastors. One week we were studying the parable of the Good Samaritan and, after we read the story, one of the pastors in the study said, “What a gem...”

It was such a simple thing to say, yet I have thought about that statement so many times over the years when I've thought about this parable: “What a *gem.*” //

Now, I'm sure my friend was pointing out the fact that the story of the Good Samaritan is a *precious* story – one of the most beautiful, priceless lessons we have in our Bible...a practically perfect example of the kind of love and faithfulness we are to show as Christians.

This is indeed a “gem” of a story...but not just because this story is precious and beautiful and priceless.

As I've thought about my friend's comment regarding the parable of the Good Samaritan – “What a gem” – it has occurred to me that one of the beautiful things about gems is how they can look so different from different angles and in different light.

Sometimes gems look dull. Sometimes you can see flaws inside. Sometimes the color is rich and deep while at other times the color is more opaque or airy. And, of course, sometimes gems hit the light just right and they absolutely sparkle.

So. What happens if we look at this “gem” of a story from different angles...if we look at in different light – perhaps from the points of view of the characters within it?

Let's start with the priest and the temple helper. If we heard their story, perhaps it might go something like this...: *[Imagine first-person.]*

A few days ago I was walking from Jerusalem to Jericho. I hate that road. It's steep...it's really narrow in places...and then, there are so many spots where you just can't see everything around you: bushes, trees, hills – anyone can be anywhere on that road, just waiting to attack and terrorize.

As I was walking that road the other day something happened that's been bothering me ever since: I turned a corner and saw something – *someone* – I think.

He was lying on the ground, shriveled up like...I don't know...like he'd been beaten and left for dead. And that's what I thought – I thought he was dead.

Well, I'm a priest – a *priest*. I'm supposed to be the keeper of the religious law, one of those who not only *knows* what we're supposed to do to be faithful, but who sets the example for everyone else.

I saw this man and I immediately tensed-up. I tell you I thought he was dead – and we have religious laws about touching dead bodies. Dead bodies are unclean; we are made unclean if we touch them...

What was I supposed to do? I didn't know – I just didn't know. And I couldn't take the time to think about it. I mean, what if I'd stopped for a while and then someone had come along and attacked *me*, too...?

So I just crossed the road and kept walking. But as I walked along I couldn't get it out of my head. I didn't think there was really anything I could have done.

After I'd been walking again for a while, it occurred to me the man could have still been alive. It didn't seem possible because he'd been beaten so badly, but, still...

I didn't think there was any way he could have still been alive. So I tried to push that thought out of my mind as I walked on.

A few days later I was talking with a friend of mine about this. My friend is another religious leader – a guy who helps out in the temple with me. Well...we think we came upon the same man. It turns out my friend had been walking from Jerusalem to Jericho that same day I'd been on the road.

He, too, had been on that road and he, like me, he had also come upon a man who had been beaten very badly. It had to have been the same man.

My friend had thought the man was dead, too...and the same thoughts had gone through his mind that had gone through mine:

“He's dead. Dead bodies are unclean...I need to keep moving... What if the men who attacked him are hiding nearby, just waiting for their next victim?” So he walked by, too...just like I had. And later he, too, wondered if the man were still alive...just like I had wondered.

I guess, if the man still had been alive, for his sake, my friend and I can only pray that someone else came along and stopped to help him. For our sakes, though, if he had still been alive, we can only pray for forgiveness: forgiveness for being bound by law...forgiveness for seeing him and just walking by on the other side of the road. // //

So that was the priest and the temple helper. Then, of course, there's the Samaritan. Same road, now the third person to see this man beaten and left for dead. He might tell the story like this...: *[Imagine first-person]*

A few days ago I was walking from Jerusalem to Jericho. I hate that road. It's steep...it's really narrow in places...and then, there are so many spots where you just can't see everything around you: bushes, trees, hills – anyone can be anywhere on that road, just waiting to attack and terrorize.

That road is also tough sometimes just because I'm Samaritan.

Hundreds of years ago when Israel fell to Assyria, over time there were mixed marriages between Israelites and Assyrians; the children and descendants of those mixed marriages – my people – are called "Samaritans." And the Israelites don't like the mixture.

We Samaritans are part Israelite, but a lot of Israelites pay very little attention to us...or worse. They say their bloodlines were "tainted." Being a Samaritan walking that road between Jerusalem and Jericho is not always the most pleasant of experiences.

It's funny, Israelites are supposed to be so loving: loving God and loving their neighbors...it's hard to ignore their hypocrisy sometimes.

We Samaritans are *blood relatives*, yet so many of them treat us like absolute dirt. But...this is not really the point of my story.

The other day while I was walking that road, I saw a man lying at the side of it. He was shriveled up and very badly wounded. I could tell he'd been beaten – probably attacked by a band of robbers who'd stolen his valuables and left him for dead.

He was in really bad shape. In fact, at first I thought he was dead and I started looking around for a place to bury him – or at least to pull him off the road, away from walking traffic. I wanted to be respectful.

But as I bent down to move him, I heard him breathing. It was quiet, and very labored, but he was definitely still breathing. So I walked back over to where my donkey was, I went through my packs, and I took out some wine and oil.

I cleaned the man's wounds with the wine and then, when his wounds were dry, I put a little bit of oil on them – to keep them soft as I carried him. I was worried I might make things worse for the poor man, but I picked him up, I put him on my donkey, and walked until we came to an inn.

I got a room where the man could lie down and I did my best to tend his wounds.

But I had to leave the next day. He was doing much better, so I gave the innkeeper some money, asked him to take care of the man, and promised him I'd be back soon.

I guess I just did what I could. I lost some travel time...but what else was I supposed to do? The poor man was lying there, dying at the side of the road. I couldn't just *ignore* him.

And who knows when someone else might have come by who would have helped? It could have been hours, or days even. Plus, the men who had attacked him could have been lurking somewhere nearby, waiting to finish the job they'd started.

When I went back to the inn a few days later, the man looked so much better and he couldn't thank me enough. But, like I said, what else was I supposed to do? He was a fellow human being and he needed help. // //

So, those were the stories of the priest, the temple helper, and the Samaritan. Then there's the story of the man himself. Perhaps *it* would go something like this...: [*Imagine first-person*]

A few days ago I was walking from Jerusalem to Jericho. I hate that road. It's steep...it's really narrow in places...and then, there are so many spots where you just can't see everything around you: bushes, trees, hills – anyone can be anywhere on that road, just waiting to attack and terrorize.

And, this particular day, that is exactly what happened to me.

I don't remember much about the attack – I just remember there were several of them...I remember they stripped me of everything I had...and I remember that the beating seemed to go on and on.

After what felt like an eternity, they let me fall to ground and they ran off. I couldn't see much, I was having trouble breathing, and I was in so much pain that all I could do was think and pray.

I thought about my family...my friends...and I prayed to God they would be all right if I didn't make it.

I don't know how long I was lying there, but I do know that, at some point, two people walked by me without doing anything. I have no idea who they were and I was too weak to call for help.

Maybe they thought I was dead...I don't know. All I *know* is that they didn't stop.

A third person came by and I don't know who he was either.

But *he* saw me. He cleaned my wounds, he put me on his donkey, and he brought me to an inn where I could rest in safety. He and the innkeeper continued to care for me until I was well enough to go home.

Since the robbers had taken all of my valuables, I didn't have anything to repay the man – as a way of thanking him. But that didn't seem to matter to him. And in some ways he didn't even seem to understand what an incredible thing he'd done for me. He may *still* not understand that...but *I* do. And I will be forever grateful.

// //

An expert in the Law of Moses stood up and asked Jesus a question to see what he would say. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to have eternal life?" Jesus answered, "What is written in the Scriptures? How do you understand them?"

The man replied, "The Scriptures say, 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind.' They also say, 'Love your neighbors as much as you love yourself.'" Jesus said, "You have given the right answer. If you do this, you will have eternal life."

But the man wanted to show that he knew what he was talking about. So he asked Jesus, "Who are my neighbors?" Jesus replied:

As a man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, robbers attacked him and grabbed everything he had. They beat him up and ran off, leaving him half dead.

A priest happened to be going down the same road. But when he saw the man, he walked by on the other side. Later a temple helper came to the same place. But when he saw the man who had been beaten up, he also went by on the other side.

A man from Samaria then came traveling along that road. When he saw the man, he felt sorry for him and went over to him. He treated his wounds with olive oil and wine and bandaged them. Then he put him on his own donkey and took him to an inn, where he took care of him. The next morning he gave the innkeeper two silver coins and said, "Please take care of the man. If you spend more than this on him, I will pay you when I return."

Then Jesus asked, "Which one of these three people was a real neighbor to the man who was beaten up by robbers?" The teacher answered, "The one who showed pity." Jesus said, "Go and do the same!"

// //

Different angles...different lights...different perspectives. This is, indeed, a "gem" of a story, as my friend said years ago.

And as I think about the characters in the story of the Good Samaritan, I can't help but wonder who *I* am in this story...

Sometimes I am the priest and the temple helper – debating in my head when I see someone in need...wondering if it's the right thing to do...but, in the end, I just walk by on the other side of the proverbial road and hope someone else comes along to help.

Sometimes – *sometimes* – I am the Good Samaritan. Sometimes I do the merciful deed: I stop to see if someone needs help...if they need to talk...if they need to pray....if they need a shoulder to cry on.

And, if I'm being completely honest, sometimes *I* am one lying by the side of the road, waiting for someone to see me and to stop and help.

// //

Thankfully, our God offers us grace and forgiveness when we find ourselves playing the part of the priest or the temple helper.

Yet, the challenge of the story is this: if we are to inherit true life in all its blessing and abundance – if we are to offer true hospitality in this life – the role of the Good Samaritan is the one we are called to play.

May it be so.