

God Will Use Who God Will Use

Luke 10:25-37

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This is one of those stories we know by heart — stories that we have heard so many times we hardly hear them at all anymore.

It's a story worth knowing, that of the Good Samaritan though the phrase "good Samaritan" never appears in scripture. If your Bible includes it as a heading, the editors added it in on their own, to help you find it, maybe, and offer a little summary statement since the Bible is, well, long.

We have it, though, so we might as well use it, right? The Samaritan is good. And if the Samaritan in the story is good, the other two that he is compared to, the priest and the Levite, they, by default, become bad.

And while we're talking about bad guys, don't forget the other bad guy — the lawyer who starts this whole thing in the first place, the one who asks Jesus how to inherit eternal life. Because obviously he's testing Jesus, right? And testing Jesus, who is good, well, that's bad.

So there you have it. Jesus and the Samaritan are good. Be like Jesus and the Samaritan. The lawyer, the priest, and the Levite, they are bad. Don't be like the lawyer, the priest, or the Levite.

On a holiday weekend especially, it's tempting to leave it at that 250-word sermon and send you on your way to barbecue and watermelon, pool parties and fireworks as far as the eye can see. Except we're finishing up a sermon series on justice today, and an overly-simplistic interpretation of this story is an injustice to everyone involved.

What if we did away with assuming anyone is defined entirely as good or bad? What if we assumed that everyone in this story

is just like us — a mixed bag? The truth is, none of us deserve to be defined by our very best moment, but neither do we deserve to be defined by our worst. If we do away with those categorical assumptions, what's left for this story to teach us?

Because first there's the lawyer. *Maybe* he's testing Jesus. But he calls Jesus teacher, a sign of respect. *Maybe* he's just incredibly earnest, so desiring to do right that he's always willing to rethink or reconsider what Jesus asks of us. *Maybe* he is quicker than the rest of us, actually, in realizing that faith is a moving target, not a one-and-done accomplishment.

Then there's the priest and the Levite, the first two who encounter the wounded man on the road. It's easy to look down on them and judge them for callously continuing on their way, especially since they are the professionally religious folks in the story. But it's not outside the realm of possibility that they were rushing to be with others in equally urgent need or that they were very aware that not only had this man been attacked on this road, but several others before him, and they feared for their own safety. None of this offers an *excuse*, of course, at least not a good one. It does, however, suggest that their decisions to keep going might not be as straightforward as we typically assume. It is possible they had to make a judgement call, and it is possible that if it were any other day, they would have done differently. It is possible to give them the benefit of the doubt, just like folks have given me when I've made a decision I've later regretted.

And finally, there's that good Samaritan. We're so conditioned to calling him that, it's

easy to forget that to the first folks who heard this story, Samaritans were anything *but* good. They were the “other.” They worshipped the same God as the priests and Levites, but they rejected two-thirds of the Hebrew Bible as false teaching. They thought the temple in Jerusalem was a disgrace. They had their own temple, on Mount Gerazim, with their own separate priesthood. Everyone in Jerusalem thought *that* was the disgrace. Samaritans and Jews... they were each heretics in the other’s eyes,¹ even if this particular Samaritan knew something of compassion and mercy.

That’s why “good” and “bad” just don’t work. The world has never been that easily divided, not even in Jesus’ day. If we buy into the falsehood that it can be, we are deceiving ourselves.

I mentioned earlier that we are finishing up our sermon series on justice today. For five weeks now we have considered some of the stories justice needs to tell, and thought together about what justice looks like, and where it shows up, and how it shows up, and who it serves, and why people of faith are called to pursue it.

Now, just because this sermon series concludes today doesn’t mean we’ll stop talking about justice. Justice is woven into our sacred text and into our ancient tradition and into our daily lives.

Since it is the last day of this series, though, I want to offer an observation that comes from the priest, the Levite, and the Samaritan together: The *pursuit* of justice is a noble and essential and faithful endeavor, one that by definition demands a great deal from us. But the *realization* of justice does not depend on us. Ultimately, the full realization of justice is in God’s hands. God’s will will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. This is a declaration, not a question. The only *question* is if we will be part of it, or not.

Look at today’s scripture again. A man is attacked and left by the side of the road, wounded and in pain. I am confident it is God’s will in that moment for the man to be noticed and cared for, for his body and his spirit alike to be made well again. So along comes a priest, and then a Levite. Both of whom handle holy things and perform sacred rituals and offer sacrifices on a regular basis. They know what their religious teachings would have them do. But for whatever reason, they do not stop.

In this story, God’s will is left by the side of the road by those who are supposedly the most in tune to it. But that is not where it stays. Because a Samaritan, a Samaritan of all people, comes along tends to the man, and in so doing, tends to God’s will, as well. God’s will is realized even without those who claim to be the most invested in it.

To put it as bluntly as possible: The religious folks in this story, the faithful folks, the show-up-to-worship-every-week folks, don’t get the job done. And while that might break God’s heart, it does not stop God’s justice. God is going to do what God is going to do in this world, whether we are part of it or not. Justice will roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. Of that, there is no question. Again, the only actual question asked of us is on which side of the dam will we find ourselves. Will we do everything in our power to help the water break through faster? Or will we be on the other side, holding up the barrier and holding back the water as long as possible?

The Constitution of the United States was written and signed in 1787. Two hundred years later, in 1987, the country celebrated the Constitution’s bicentennial. Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, who 20 years earlier, in 1967, became the first African American to sit on our highest court, offered a cautionary word at the festivities. He said, “The

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, “The Good Heretic” in *Always a Guest*, 2020.

focus of this celebration invites a belief that the vision of the founding fathers yielded 'the more perfect union' it is said we now enjoy." But Justice Marshall disagreed with that assessment. "The government the Framers' devices," he explained, "was defective from the start, requiring several amendments, a civil war, and momentous social transformation" to better realize the promise of a more just society. Credit for the Constitution in its present meaning, Marshall concluded, belonged not to the Framers but to "everyone who refused to acquiesce in outdated notions of liberty, justice, and equality, and who strived to better them." He believed in America, he said, but only because he believed that America was still becoming. That America was still a work in progress, not a finished product. We cannot be defined by some yesterday, he said. If America is to be America, we must be defined by a tomorrow we have yet to see.²

In 1857, Roger Taney, then-Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, penned the Dred Scott Decision. Mr. Scott was a slave who had traveled and lived in free states and territories. He appealed to the court that he should be a free man. Taney, writing for the Court, stated that the Constitution did not allow for Scott's freedom because as a slave, he was property, not a human being.

Twenty-seven years later, the Court again heard cases addressing the civil rights of former slaves. In 1883, the Court revoked the Civil Rights Act of 1875, asserting that no person descending from slaves could ever be a citizen. Justice John Harlan found himself opposing the rest of the Court, a lone dissenter. But when it came time to write his dissent, he struggled to find the words. Months passed, and he found himself in "a quagmire of logic, precedent, and law." One Sunday morning while he was at

church, his wife Malvina Harlan retrieved an inkwell from the Court. She placed it, and his writing pad, at his desk. When he returned from church, she told him that there was an inkwell in his office that needed redemption. It needed to write words of freedom rather than words of oppression. So Justice John Harlan sat down that Sunday afternoon and wrote his dissent, using the very same inkwell that Justice Taney had used 30 years earlier to enslave Dred Scott.³

Justice Harlan did not prevail that day. But he did pound against the dam, part of what would eventually become a sea change. In part because John Harlan picked up his pen, Thurgood Marshall donned his robe and reminded us that we cannot be defined by yesterday. We can only be defined by tomorrow — what we will choose to fight for and who we will choose to be.

That is the question not just for our country, but for the church, as well.

Because God's justice demands a lot of us, and even desires a great deal for us, but ultimately, it does not depend upon us. This is good news, of course. Incredibly good news. But to those who have ears to hear, it is also a word of instruction, a word of challenge and charge.

God's hope and prayer and intent for all of us as ones who are made in the image of God is that we would reflect God's compassion and love, that we would enact God's mercy and justice, that we would bear witness to God's grace and peace. God's hope and prayer and intent for all of us is not that we would get lost in the question, "Who is my neighbor?" Because while that is a good question, it is not the most important question. That's why Jesus turns the question on its side as he talks with the lawyer.

² Michael J. Gaetz and Linda Greenhouse, *The Burger Court and the Rise of the Judicial Right*, 2016.

³ Ruth Bader Ginsburg, *My Own Words*, 2016.

The most important question, the most faithful question, is not, "Who is my neighbor?" but rather, "Whose neighbor am I willing to be?" Who out there in the world is in need of mercy? And what are we doing about it? Who will we choose to be?

The answer to those questions will shape the story that justice tells about us.