

Marsha and Shirley recently became our very own ‘Good Samaritans,’ here at First United.

They ran across the ‘victim’ not that long ago, ambling across the road. And I mean that literally. Marsha nearly hit a puppy with her car! So when she opened the door, racked with guilt, and it jumped up on her lap, yipping with all its might, lavishly licking her face, and wrapping its paws around her waist, she knew she would do whatever it took to make him well again.

And she did.

She took that puppy into her home, she fed him, she anointed him, and she returned him to his owner as good as new. And maybe even healthier than before.

Of course we are not at all surprised. Because Marsha and Shirley are *very good* people, as are we all at First United. And helping those who are hurting is simply what good people do.

Which is why, when I first arrived as your pastor and I invited you to share with me your favorite Bible passages, The Parable of The Good Samaritan was the most-loved story. By a wide margin. Hands down.

This makes sense to me, because of the ‘can-do’ mission spirit that permeates this place and leads everyone I have met so far to do everything you can—above and beyond the call of duty—to help those who are hurting and to make the world a better place.

Which is exactly what the parable of The Good Samaritan teaches us to do.

But that is not all that the parable teaches . . .

The point of the parable, in my interpretation, hinges on a question: ‘Who is my neighbor?’ Who is the one I am commanded to love ‘as myself’?

And the answer is, in this case, the Samaritan.

Which is, to put it bluntly, a *scandalous* thing to say! Then and now.

Samaritans are, in the time of Jesus, only ‘neighbors’ to first-century Jews by virtue of *geography*. They live to the north. The place ‘good people’ don’t go. Because in every other way Samaritans in the time of Jesus are the hated *enemy*.

And vice versa.

First century Jews blame the Samaritans for perverting their common religious heritage and lying in wait, ready to destroy them with a violent uprising as soon as they get the chance.

First century Samaritans blame the Jews for selling them out to an imperial army that tortured their people and demolished their temple and destroyed their way of life forever.

The blame game goes deep between these two historic groups, linked by a common ancestry but now determined to annihilate one another. They are ‘neighbors’ *only* by geography. In every other way they are mortal enemies.

So when Jesus tells this story about a Jewish man beaten by robbers and left for dead and along comes a Samaritan, well, everyone knows the rest of the story. The Samaritan is going to finish the job.

But instead the hated enemy, the one who thinks you destroyed his way of life, the one you think is going to destroy yours in return, has mercy, and saves you, and heals you, and restores you to life.

And you have to allow your enemy to serve as your neighbor in order to survive.

*Talk about a scandal!*

In a lecture delivered two years ago, the New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine from Vanderbilt Divinity School compared the parable of the Good Samaritan to ‘going to Israel today and telling the story based on the Gaza Strip, where an Israeli soldier and a Christian peace-worker pass an injured Jew, only for him to be helped by a Muslim Palestinian who is part of Hamas.’

That is the kind of scandalous mercy Jesus is talking about.

And of course today, in light of what we have seen these past weeks, I would take it a step further: this parable would be like going to Gaza, on this very day, where far too many children continue to be left for dead, and to have those children brought back to life . . . by the chief of the Israeli Defense Force, himself.

*That* is the kind of scandalous mercy Jesus is talking about!

The point of the parable of the Good Samaritan is that we have to be willing to see our mortal enemies as hurting human beings, in order to maintain our humanity. Even when it is really, really hard. Even when it is impossible.

‘What must I do to inherit eternal life?’ is how this whole parable gets started in the first place. When a lawyer, an expert in Mosaic Law, wants to test Jesus.

The lawyer already knows the answer. As do we. Love God with everything we are. And love our neighbor as ourself.

And the lawyer really does, deep down, also already know who his ‘neighbor’ is. As do we.

It is written in the earliest pages of that beautiful Mosaic Law that he studies so diligently. In that second chapter of Genesis to which I keep referring with our children. In the creation of human community. Which is that our neighbor whom we are commanded to love is the one into whose face we look. And see the mirror image of ourselves. Bone of our bone. Flesh of our flesh.

Which really is *everyone!*

So if the parable of the Good Samaritan really is the favorite Bible story of First United Presbyterian Church, what does that mean for us?

The first question is this . . .

Do we really want to inherit eternal life?

And the second question is this . . .

Are we willing to turn our enemies into our neighbors . . . and then love them as ourselves?

It is the point of the whole gospel, in my view. The thing that Jesus taught that was so radical. Then and now.

And if we think it does not apply to us because we really don’t have any enemies, then we must imagine those people and places who consider *us* their enemies. And imagine the ‘eternal life’ we could all be living, if we intentionally walked into those places and offered our compassion to those who hate us.

In the end, the point of the story, really is about choosing goodness in the face of evil; love in the face of hate; light in the face of darkness; and life in the face of death. Right here. Right now. Today.

Because we are all, in the end, every one of us, just one body. And the one life we end up saving, in the end, is always, truth be told, our very own.

I pray it may be so.

Amen.