Hi,

Here are today’s updates:

* My 3pm Monday Matthew class and my noon Tuesday class on Genesis will meet this week on [my new Facebook Page: “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC.”](https://www.facebook.com/Scott-Engle-St-Andrew-UMC-110365790736617/?modal=admin_todo_tour)
* The links to my on-line classes, the video recordings of the classes, the class audio podcasts, and the archive of these daily emails can all be found at [www.scottengle.org](http://scottengle.org/scotts-weekly-classes/). All the postings are up-to-date.

This week, we are going to turn to some of Jesus’ parables. Sometimes, it is hard for us to hear the shock in Jesus’ words. This well-known parable is a case in point.

***Luke 10:25-37 (NRSV)***

**Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” And Jesus said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”**

**But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”**

The so-called Parable of the Good Samaritan is the best-known of all Jesus’ parables. People who don’t know anything about Jesus or the Bible know that being a Good Samaritan is about helping someone in trouble. We even have Good Samaritan laws that protect from blame those who help others who have been injured.

But a closer look at Jesus’ story reveals that it has a hard edge and challenging message that goes far beyond simply helping someone in trouble.

*Being neighborly?*

A casual, uninformed reading of the parable leads to an unarguable conclusion – if someone needs help, even someone you don’t know, step up and help them. This is absolutely in keeping with Jesus’ teaching and even our own consciences. But Jesus would hardly use a parable to convey such an obvious and uncontroversial point. No, there is much more going on in this story.

First, go back over the exchange between the lawyer and Jesus. The lawyer wants to know how to inherit eternal life. Jesus asks the man what is contained in the Law, and the lawyer responds as Jesus would – love God and love neighbor (see Matthew 22:34-39). But the lawyer won’t stop there. Trying to show everyone how righteous he is, the lawyer goes on to ask, “Who is my neighbor?” The very fact that he asks the question reveals that the man isn’t nearly as righteous as he thinks he is. He would know the answer if he really comprehended God’s Law. Further, the question is a trap. Social boundaries were central to Jewish society, as they struggled to maintain a distinct separate identity from the pagan world around them. Boundary markers, such as Sabbath observance and circumcision, were cherished and protected . . . to a fault. The lawyer asks a dangerous question and Jesus knows that he has a dangerous answer, one that will offend and probably not even be understood, so Jesus answers the question with a vivid parable.

The parable begins with an unidentified man who is traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho, which lies a short distance to the northeast. Certainly, Jesus’ listeners would have assumed the man is Jewish and would have identified with him as he is beaten and left for dead. When Jesus tells of a priest that passes by and then a Levite (the tribe of priests), his listeners probably expected that the third person, the hero, would be a regular Jew like them. Then, the story would become a pretty standard anticlerical warning.

But that isn’t what Jesus does at all. Instead, the hero of the story is a Samaritan! The shock here is lost on us unless we know that the Samaritans were despised by the Jews. Not just disliked but hated. Jews allowed themselves no contact at all with Samaritans. When Jesus once asked a Samaritan woman for a drink, she was shocked, for a Jew would never do such a thing (see John 4 for the whole story).

Jesus’ listeners were probably not even sure they would have accepted help from a Samaritan. And then Jesus goes on to detail at length all the aid and compassion that the Samaritan provides, skillfully driving home that it is a Samaritan who not only helps, but is the one who understands what God really means by “neighbor.”

This parable is part and parcel of Jesus’ going after the boundaries that the Jews had constructed around themselves. They clung so tightly to their cherished boundary markers that they were deaf to God’s call and had forgotten that all the families of the earth were to be blessed through them (Genesis 12:3). You can be sure there was a lot of talk, much of it agitated, after Jesus finished the story.

*A telling retelling*

But, of course, words like “priest,” “Levite,” and “Samaritan” don’t have any emotional weight with modern readers. Even knowing that the Jews despised Samaritans doesn’t get us emotionally involved. So, following John Dominic Crossan, let’s “rephrase the story in contemporary dress.”

The storyteller becomes an American who has recently returned from working in Afghanistan for a year. The place is just north of Kabul. The wounded person is a woman correspondent for ABC. Those who pass by without helping her are, first, an American soldier and, second, an Afghan soldier. Finally, she is rescued and cared for by a Taliban fighter.

You can fill out the details yourself. What sort of reaction do you think this story would get from the listeners?

If the story as retold here upsets you or causes you to shout – “It could never happen that way!” – then you are getting in touch with Jesus’ story. The parables are meant to shock and to subvert, to shake us up and definitely *not* leave us unchanged.

This parable is not about “loving your neighbor.” There couldn’t be anything shocking or emotional in that. As Crossan puts it: “Do we really think that the [American] storyteller would be able to convince an audience which was about to hang him that all he was trying to say was ‘Love your neighbor’ ”?

Jesus builds the story around a Samaritan for a reason – to confront his listeners with the question of whether they really understand God’s definition of “neighbor.” In other words, it is Jesus saying, “Can you hear me now?” Can we?

*A bit more: What’s a Parable?*

Jesus often taught using parables. Indeed, more than two dozen such stories are recorded for us in the Gospels. Jesus obviously used such stories on many occasions as he sought to help people understand the kingdom of God, for that is subject of many of the parables.

A parable is a very short story with a double meaning; it is brief and metaphorical. On the surface, the parable might be about sowing or fishing, but on a deeper level, it points to something else and it challenges the hearer to discover that second meaning by thoughtful listening. C. H. Dodd gives us a classic definition that repays a close reading: “At its simplest, the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.” In other words, we need to let Jesus’ parables surprise us and make us think!

One caution . . . the nature of the parables makes it easy for us to let our imaginations run wild. Over the centuries, Christians have done exactly that. My advice is that you let the stories be stories, don’t push them too far, and try to hear the surprise! Let the stories subvert your normal way of thinking.

‘til tomorrow, grace and peace,

Scott