

New Interpretations of Old Stories

Finding Hope Again, Luke 10:25-37, Isaiah 61:1-3

Just before Jesus was born Israel was a divided nation, feeling the discontents of a nation injured by its religious and political leaders, as well as the Romans who invaded their territory. What many people thought might be a good thing for Israel's economic woes ---that is the Roman power machine---- turned out to be a miserable reality for the average person. The leaders got rich while the average person kept sinking. Justice was hard to find and people began to blame groups of leaders and foreigners coming into their districts. Even the religious leaders fed into the message of hate by pointing fingers at groups of people they deemed as heretics and sinners for the continued suffering of Israel. But all the while the leaders kept getting wealthier while posturing their discontent.

It is the same old story. The world hasn't change from the first century to the present. Hope is always being pushed further away from reality, not able to break out, because of the hate and prejudice fueled by people's misery. All the time trying to find someone to blame. It is into this social environment that the Word of God comes to us in Jesus Christ. Jesus comes into this world to preach the good news of God's hope for the world. What his message proposes for all us is the "breaking down of walls" and accepting the challenge to rearrange our spiritual focus so that peace could emerge by the embracing of both the oppressors and the victims. For the world to become more like its intended purpose it needed forgiveness, justice and reconciliation for all not just a few. It is into this world and with the intent of reconciliation that Jesus spoke to his community that great parable of the "Good Samaritan."

At first, the story seems a straight forward admonition to be kind and compassionate, even to the least of humanity. Indeed, that may be a part of the parable but because of other important facts the story moves beyond a simple moral ethic to a strikingly spiritual challenge toward a new meaning and experience of justice. The first determination to make in the story is the character and purpose of the person asking the question---the lawyer. The story goes "Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Lawyers were part of the religious aristocracy who became the mouth pieces and academicians behind the policies of the Sanhedrin. They provided the tools for the often-tyrannical legislation of the Law. So, this was a lawyerly discussion to defend the policies of the religious leaders. What he wanted was to defend was the religious leaders to who interpret the strictest measures the law as a means to righteousness. By establishing this they would have the authority to demand more penance of those that broke their strict code, more authority and determine the means to eternal life.

Jesus accommodated his approach and got him to admit, at least, that the foundation of the law was the Shema---"to love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul, and neighbor as yourself." Jesus agreed with him. But like all lawyers, and I apologize for the seemingly unkind sentiment, he needed to defend his position. So, he continued, "But who is my neighbor?" So now it moves beyond the question of moral requirements for eternal life to social responsibilities. It is here that Jesus inserts the parable of the Good Samaritan as a means of challenging approved understanding of neighbor.

But the lawyer is out of his depth. He is debating with the Son of God and the master of the parable. The parable is simple: "A man is assaulted, assumingly a Jew, a priest and a Levite both saw him on the road but chose to ignore his suffering. A Samaritan was also walking on the road but was moved by compassion to help the man. He bandaged him and took him to a motel to rest and paid for his stay." At this point Jesus asked the lawyer, "Who was a good neighbor?" Jesus didn't reiterate the lawyers question but asserted a new one--- who is a good neighbor. The lawyer reluctantly said, "The man that showed compassion." "Then go do likewise." The fact that the man is a Samaritan becomes the other important feature of the parable. The changing of the question and the man's cultural heritage become the center on which the parable turns. It is here that Jesus offers his spiritual challenge.

The spiritual challenge is this: To accept that someone considered morally unfit can provide moral and spiritual leadership to others by an act of compassion. Samaritans, as a whole, were hated and thought suspicious people by all of Israel. They were heretics who gave up their heritage through mixing their racial purity with the enemy. So, it is not only important what the man does to help this injured man, it is also important to know the cultural placement of the Samaritan.

Can we say, like the lawyer who was forced to acknowledge that the Samaritan did the right thing, that other cultural groups we might harbor some suspicion are capable of doing righteous and compassionate actions? Can we say, "Good Iranian," "Good Mexican" or "Good Russian or "Good Caucasian." This is God's hope for His church and the hope for the church for the 21st Century. In order for the church to be called the followers of Jesus we must find a way to reach beyond the walls of prejudice to the openness of engagement. Jesus challenged his friends and nation to move beyond their indoctrination of prejudice of the Samaritans to see them as real people, thereby becoming more useful to God's Kingdom. The future is ours to embrace with the hope of finding a new vision for the church. But like all things we must be willing to change.

Hope exists as we begin to understand that God is in the business of change. Jesus moved passed his cultural admonitions that created a kind of religious aristocracy but failed to reach beyond our human judgments. Jesus tried to move passed those prescribed cultural edicts that lay the ground work for division and isolation. A divided people creates anxiety and interference with our spiritual growth. The parable of the Good Samaritan is an entrance into a new world of hope----free of division and anxiety. All it takes is living out the command----Go and do likewise.