



**SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE**  
in the City of New York  
*The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector*  
[www.SaintThomasChurch.org](http://www.SaintThomasChurch.org)

**Sunday, July 14, 2019**  
*The Fifth Sunday After Pentecost*

*Choral Eucharist*  
*at 11:00 a.m.*

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A Sermon by  
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*

*on*

Deuteronomy 30:9-14, Colossians 1:1-14, and Luke 10:25-37

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### **It's not about being good; it's about trying to be a neighbor**

The Parable of the Good Samaritan remains one of the most loved and, in a world that is increasingly secular, one of the best-known stories of Jesus. So well-known that it is often read superficially as if it is simply about doing good to those less fortunate than ourselves.

Even the title 'the *good* Samaritan' is remarkable. Jesus does not describe him as good – *we* describe him as good. If you want to know what the disciples thought of Samaritans, simply read a few lines in the previous chapter; before Jesus sends out the 72 on their great mission (cold-visiting as Fr. Bennet so appropriately named it last week). "*When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" But he turned and rebuked them. Then they went on to another village.*" (Luke 9:51-55)

Samaritans were not good in the eyes of Jesus' disciples and that animosity went back to the division of the Kingdom and was made worse by the exile in Babylon. Samaritans thought that they were the faithful remnant of Israel – other Jews despised them as not being pure Jews. Remember the meeting of Jesus with the woman of Samaria at the well in John's Gospel? Samaritans were not push-overs. Knowing that the Samaritan as not considered good by the people Jesus grew up with and lived among helps us understand how powerful this parable truly is.

So, let's think a little bit more about the context.

The parable comes in response to a lawyer's question about eternal life. This lawyer had spent his life studying the Torah. He knew all about the search for a quality of life that made all the difference. Unlike this same encounter in Matthew's Gospel where Jesus answers the question, in Luke's account, Jesus turns the question back on him – "Come on, you know the Law – you're a good Jew – what have you learned after all these years?" And the lawyer, without hesitation, recites the *Shema Yisrael* – words from Deuteronomy recited twice a day at morning and evening prayers which begins, "*Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One. 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.*" Then, the lawyer adds more words – this time from what we call the Holiness Code of Leviticus, "*and your neighbor as yourself.*"

Jesus praises the lawyer but the lawyer pushes back, “And who is my neighbor?”

Was this a test? Was he setting a trap for Jesus? The Torah was clear about how to treat widows and orphans; gentiles and foreigners so why ask this question? But, perhaps, it also revealed the struggle of living in a changing world and under enemy occupation. Are the Romans really my neighbor?

So to the parable itself.

First, let’s put aside the priest and the Levite. Just as the Samaritan is not necessarily good, neither are the priest and the Levite necessarily bad. They had responsibilities – they knew the Law. Had they intervened they would have been prevented from their functions in the Temple to help the community worship God – which is, after all, the first commandment. That being said, they saw him and they didn’t help him. So, who will? Here’s the rub – the Samaritan is moved with pity at the sight of the man who had been robbed and left for half-dead. It is easy to get caught up in the charitable action of the Samaritan; the first aid and the kindness of taking him to the inn on his own animal which meant he had to walk; the leaving of a deposit and the promise of paying his bills; but then, the Samaritan leaves and we do not hear of him again. In fact, he has handed over responsibility for this unfortunate man to an inn keeper.

For a second time, Jesus turns a question back on the lawyer, “*Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?*” Let’s stop there; did you notice the subtle shift? Jesus has **changed** the lawyer’s question. The Lawyer wanted to know who was *his* neighbor. Politicians, social workers, teachers, and especially the Church like to tell us whom we should count as our neighbor and how we can help them. But Jesus isn’t talking about the man robbed, beaten up and left half-dead. This is not a parable simply about marginalized people or social inclusion. It is not even about being nice to Samaritans. It is far more powerful and has far-reaching consequences: “*Which of these three, do you think, **was a neighbor to the man** who fell into the hands of the robbers?*” The question ‘Who is my neighbor?’ is the wrong question. ‘How can I be a neighbor’ is what Jesus is interested in. The Lawyer cannot even say the word ‘Samaritan’ and describes him as the ones who showed mercy. “*Go, and do the same yourself,*” said Jesus. In other words, don’t look for who your neighbor might be, go and **be** a neighbor — don’t pity those less fortunate – don’t just be charitable – be a neighbor yourself. Make relationships; make a difference.

I guess that many of us on our way to Church this morning or when we go home after mass will pass people who will remind us of the man robbed and beaten and left half-dead. We could all put our hands in our pockets and try and make a difference materially but the words of the Gospel should be ringing in our ears – “*Which of these three, do you think, **was a neighbor?***” How can I change the balance of power so that I am truly a neighbor to those around me, not just the poor and less fortunate, but to those I find difficult, those who hold different views to me, those who are my friends, those who are my family, and to those from whom I am estranged?

Since the parable of the Good Samaritan is really about the lawyer, so the parable is really about you and me discovering that being a neighbor is becoming more like Christ. Jesus came to save us. He is the Good Samaritan. He is the beggar, robbed and lying in a ditch. He is the innkeeper not worried if the Samaritan will ever come back. He is even the priest and the Levite who are simply trying to fulfill their vocation. He knows that we will never be able to fix everything on our own but he wants us to look at the world with his eyes and to reach out with his wounded hands and to be a neighbor in the same way that he is our Savior.