

THE BAD ECONOMICS OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN¹

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 he 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.”

Luke 10:25-37 NRSV

During my freshman year in college, the first Gulf War broke out. On the campus of my small Baptist college in East Tennessee, you had better believe the flags were flying and patriotism was running high. As the first war televised live, thanks to CNN, we were transfixed by the images of our nation’s technological might. We never thought to question the war or to consider that our Christian faith might ask us to view it in any other way besides full support.

One night at a Baptist Student Union meeting, one of our college ministers put on a skit that retold the familiar story of the Good Samaritan.² This version of the story, however, turned out to be anything but familiar. Instead of a priest and then a Levite passing by, this version had Americans walking by. Worse still, the character of the Samaritan we call good had also been changed. In this new version, it was an Iraqi who cared for the dying man by the side of the road. It is difficult to imagine how offended we felt then given our current circumstances, in which our media portrays the plight of ordinary Iraqis as sympathetic. Even with the mixed motives and feelings of Americans towards the current conflict, I think there is at least a basic understanding that Iraqi people are not evil but rather just people who want safe and good lives just as all people do. In 1991, there was no such understanding. Iraq was our enemy, and so were its people. To portray an Iraqi as a good guy then would be something like making a member of Al-Qaeda the hero today. I remember feeling that night that the skit had crossed a line and gone way too far. I was offended by it.

Jesus’ original audience would have been just as offended by his choice to make a Samaritan the exemplar of what it means to love your neighbor. Over the centuries, the differences in time and culture have massaged the rough edges off of this parable. Similarly, our human tendency to diminish the radical demands Jesus’ teachings make upon us also removes any offense from this story. We have domesticated this parable and made it into a story of someone doing a good deed. Although good deeds are certainly wonderful things, and in and of themselves, they can have great power, this parable is as much about politics, religion and prejudice as it is about charity.

To get at why this parable would have been offensive to first century Jews, we must know something about Samaritans. The Samaritans were considered traitorous half-breeds by Jews of that era. They were descendants of those who had remained when so many of the Jewish people had been taken into exile. While their kin were languishing in a far off land, they had intermarried with other ethnic groups. They had chosen not to help restore Jerusalem and its temple when the Jewish people returned from exile. They even used a different version of scripture. As the territory of Palestine became the plunder of first one empire then another, Jews and Samaritans often found each other on the opposite sides of political alliances and military battle lines.³ We can see the enmity between the two groups when Jesus talks with the Samaritan woman at the well in the fourth chapter of John; she is shocked that a Jewish man would even talk to a woman of Samaria. In today's passage, the lawyer asking the questions to Jesus will not even say the word "Samaritan" at the end of the passage when he is asked to identify who was a true neighbor. For a Jew in the first century to think positively of a Samaritan would require overcoming centuries of hostility and prejudice.

In order for the parable to be as truly shocking for us today as it was to Jesus' original audience, we need to update the story and to put someone else in the place of the Samaritan, someone who is looked down upon and despised. To make this parable offensive in an American church perhaps we might say that today the Samaritan should end up being a gay man, an atheist, a Democrat or in some churches a Republican, a Muslim, a single mother on welfare, an illegal alien or anyone who is considered less than human. I wonder what substitute for the Samaritan would make this story offensive here in our church?

The lawyer who questions Jesus was expecting an answer to his question "Who is my neighbor?" His concern was over who exactly was worthy of being loved. Once that was determined, then he could get to work fulfilling the letter of the law—loving neighbors and only neighbors. Jesus turns the question around and changes it from who is *my* neighbor to are *you* a neighbor? A former professor of mine, Luke Timothy Johnson, puts it well:

This is a dramatic and radical reversal. [Obeying the command to love one's neighbor] is no longer (if it ever was) a matter of determining ahead of time who is a worthy recipient of my care, but rather of determining how I might, at every moment discern how to *show myself* to be a neighbor to everyone I encounter. And this commandment has no end.⁴

Loving others is not limited to a certain group of people who fit the proper characteristics of race, identity, religion, income, etc. Love has no boundaries. The real question is, according to Jesus, are you willing to understand love in this way? Can you love someone you have learned to despise or hate?

Just as time and culture have made the figure of the Samaritan less offensive, they have done the same to the characters of the priest and Levite. After centuries of inaccurate depictions by Christians of Jewish religious figures as hypocrites whose rituals serve to obscure and debase a loving and merciful God, it is easy for us as Christians to view these two figures as someone distinct from and less moral than ourselves. Yet, for Jesus' original audience, there would not have been such a prejudice. Most

would have understood priests and Levites to be people who studiously followed God's laws, so to think of them as failing to obey God's law of loving one's neighbor would have come as quite a shock.

Priests and Levites were figures at the heart of Jewish religious life. Both served in the temple. In fact, Jesus' listeners' probably would have inferred that they were returning home from serving in the temple at Jerusalem. In order to do their important work not only in Jerusalem but also in their hometowns and villages, they had to follow strict laws about purity. One of those laws was a prohibition against any contact with a corpse. The man who was attacked by robbers is described as "half dead," but it probably would have required close examination to even determine that there was life left in the man. It was their religious duty to *not* investigate the situation too closely. If the man was dead or even soon to be, they would have been considered ritually unclean.⁵ Understood from this perspective, they might actually have served the greatest good by not getting involved. Contamination from a corpse would make them unable to carry out the rest of their religious duties until they had completed lengthy and inconvenient purification rituals.

It is tempting for us to remove ourselves from these two who pass by, but they represent the establishment. They are the city council members, business leaders, ministers, leading church members, community activists and the kinds of people who win awards for community involvement. Their refusal to get involved is based in large part on their commitment to their greater responsibilities serving the greater good. Asking the priest and Levite to get involved would be like asking a council member to miss a crucial vote affecting the whole town, a minister to miss an important wedding or a business leader to miss a crucial deal that could affect his employees. Yet, this story reveals that it is just this kind of disruption of our routines that God may demand of us.

Jesus' parable implies that one must be a neighbor not only at convenient times but at inconvenient times as well. Loving others involves sacrifice. As Luke Johnson notes, "[The Samaritan] literally had to step out of his own space into the place where the man lay hurting."⁶ He helped the man using his own oil and wine. Then he paid for his care at the inn. His availability to the man did not stop there but continued into the future with his promise to return and pay any further expenses. As the Samaritan's actions reveal, being a neighbor involves the willingness to be responsible for someone else's well-being and a commitment of money, time and energy to that other person.

In our culture of wealth, it is the commitment of money that I wish to specifically address today. Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan reveals that being a neighbor does not make good economic sense. Our modern economics essentially are based upon principles that fly in the face of the neighborliness Jesus speaks about here. I have never read Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, and my knowledge of it is rather slim. I am certainly no economist, but it is my understanding that it was he who first argued that a good economy was based upon the self-interest of the individual.

It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self love...⁷

Although Smith expressed some concern about how the self-interested nature of capitalism could generate moral behavior, later economists who followed Smith had no such concern. Self interest came to be understood as the guiding force of human behavior, and the responsibility of one person to

another was viewed as irrelevant. In the centuries since Smith's book, economic textbooks and Nobel laureates have declared that all facets of human society are governed by the individual's self-interest—one's own work to maximize one's ability to do what one wants in life.

In Dickens' novel *Hard Times*, there was the character of a schoolmaster whose writings sought to prove that the Good Samaritan was a bad economist. Apparently, this character was created to be a poke at the economists of Dickens' day. According to the economic theory of those times and much in our own time, altruism is an anomaly that is difficult to explain. Smith claimed that an "invisible hand" of providence would create a common good for all society out of the manifold interests of individuals.⁸ Followers of Smith in Dickens' time and our own cared little for providence and argued that acts of generosity only appear to be selfless. People help others because they want to help others in the same way they want a new car. Service to others merely satisfies an inner desire. No judgment is offered about these different wants; it is a thoroughgoing moral relativism.⁹

This understanding of humanity over the decades has spread beyond the bounds of economic theory into the writings of sociologists, psychologists and those from other disciplines. There is evidence that even in the realm of so-called "hard science," this understanding of humanity has taken root. You may have read in the news about a recent study at the University of Oregon that showed giving to charity stimulates pleasure sensations in the primitive portion of the brain. It would appear that we are wired to give to others, if the results of this study are to be believed. Some conclude from this study that generosity and charity really are just neurological impulses and therefore we do not really give out of our free will.¹⁰

Through the eyes of faith, however, we can see beyond understandings of human nature that reduce acts of sacrificial love to camouflaged self-interest or a neurological response to a stimulus. According to Jesus, such acts of love and service are a response to the love of God and a choice the believer makes. Although our creaturely love can never match the love of our Creator, Jesus' parable teaches that our acts of generosity and service do in fact make a difference in the world, because they make a difference to God. Whatever our mixed motives or inadequacies, our efforts to serve and love matter to God. The Gospel of Christ reveals that we have a part to play in God's unfolding reign. When we allow our routines to be disrupted and our self-interest to be disturbed—when we bandage the beaten on the side of life's road, we contribute not just to the greater good but the greatest good—the expansion of God's peace and grace.

The parable of the Good Samaritan defies the economic theorists and social critics who would argue that the pursuit of self-interest is the means to a good world. This story reveals the sad reality that the reckless pursuit of self-interest leaves people beaten up and dying around our world. Those beaten and robbed by our modern world economy are not just on the road to Jericho but in every American city and town. They are crossing the border from Mexico. They struggle in the sweatshops of Asia. They suffer and die in African refugee camps. Being a neighbor to these children of God means being willing to sacrifice our busy routines, our "important" work and our pocketbooks. The deeds of the Good Samaritan may make bad economic sense in our world, but they feed the growing economy of the Kingdom of God.

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¹ My sermon title is adapted from the title of an article by the economics professor Donald Frey: “The Good Samaritan as Bad Economist,” *Cross Currents* (Fall 1996). You can read the article on-line at: <http://www.aril.org/frey2.html>.

² That college minister was Jimmy Only who became a mentor and friend of mine, as well as my fellow minister at my last church in Manhasset, NY. Folks here at First Christian Church of St. Joseph will remember him from my installation service.

³ Robert T. Anderson, “Samaritans,” in *The Anchor Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, edited by David Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 940-943.

⁴ Luke Johnson, *Sharing Possessions: Mandate and Symbol of Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 104.

⁵ Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke (X-XXIV)* (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 884-887. See also, Marcus Borg, *Conflict, Holiness, and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1988), 118-119.

⁶ Luke Johnson, *Sharing Possessions* 104

⁷ Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (1776). Book I, chap. 2. As quoted by Donald Frey, “The Good Samaritan as Bad Economist.”

⁸ Donald Frey, “The Good Samaritan as Bad Economist.”

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Manya Brachear, “Generosity Feeds the Soul, Pleases the Brain” posted at the Chicago Tribune’s web site: http://newsblogs.chicagotribune.com/religion_theseeker/2007/06/generosity_feed.html