

Is Love Really Enough?

June 29, 2025 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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Texts: Galatians 5:1, 13-14 and Luke 10:25-37

It's June 29, and although we don't move the service to our summer schedule of 10:00 until next week, let's be real, it's summer around here, so I'm going to kick off summer by doing something a little different. This will be a short-ish sermon, followed by some discussion time. I think it will make sense why when we get there. First the scripture readings for today. The first passage is one of the lectionary readings for today, from Paul's letter to the Galatians. And the second passage is one of the most familiar parables in the Bible. Here we go.

[Paul writes:] Jesus, the Anointed One, freed us for freedom; stand fast, then, and do not again be restrained by the burden of slavery....For you were called to freedom, dear siblings; only don't allow this freedom to give an opening for the flesh; rather be servants for one another by love. For the whole Law is summed up in a single utterance; to wit: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

And then from Luke, which was written 30-40 years after Galatians. It makes one wonder whether the question of "Who is my neighbor?" hung over the early church for many years, with Luke relating a story from Jesus that tried to settle the matter.

[Luke writes:] And look, some lawyer [an expert in the law of Moses] stood up; putting Jesus to the test, he says, "Teacher, what do I need to do to inherit life in the-Age-to-Come?" And Jesus said to him, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" And in reply he said, "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 answer correctly; do this and you shall live." But he, wishing to vindicate himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Taking up this issue, Jesus said, "A certain man was going down from Jerusalem, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and rained blows down upon him, and went away leaving him half dead. And by coincidence some priest was going down by that road and, seeing him, passed by on the opposite side. And a Levite also, coming upon the place and, seeing him, passed by on the opposite side. But some Samaritan on a journey came upon him, and seeing him, was inwardly moved with compassion, and approaching, bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine, and setting him upon his own beast he brought him to an inn and cared for him. And taking out two denarii as he was departing on the following day, he gave them to the innkeeper and said, 'Take care of him, and whatever you spend beyond this I shall repay you on my return.' Who of these three does it seem to you was a neighbor to the man who fell to the robbers?" And he said, "The one treating him with mercy." And Jesus said to him, "Go, and you do likewise."

Thanks be to God for these words of life.

Jesus was what we might call today a spiritual genius. You can understand who he was theologically in a variety of different ways, from a low Christology that says he was simply a Divinely blessed man, to a high Christology that identifies him as the second person of the Trinity - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, which together are the one eternal God. Conceive of that as you may, and in our church we don't compel you to conceive of it in one particular way, but you gotta admit that the guy was a spiritual genius.

He clearly had an intimate sense of the Divine, a compelling moral vision, and a seemingly inexhaustible compassion for others. And, to add the icing on the three-layer cake, he was probably the greatest communicator the world has ever seen. He could take these three things – his sense of the Divine, his moral vision, and his compassion for others – and turn them into an interesting story from everyday life, with elements anyone could recognize, and which yet turned everything upside down.

I think he would do well on Tiktok or Instagram or YouTube today – although it would have to be those media shorn of their corporate overlords and atomizing algorithms, and aimed at drawing people into local communities of actual, rather than virtual, human connection and spiritual growth. Each bit he posted would end with “Now get your beautiful self down to 11 Garden St (or wherever) and join them on the journey.”

The story I read earlier is a perfect example of what I am talking about. Perhaps it is the best-known example of all. Sadly, it has come to have a racist name: “the Good Samaritan.” The clear implication of the title is that most Samaritans are bad, but this one is different. We’d never put up with “Oh, yeah, she’s from Egypt, but she’s a good Muslim.” Or, “I have this Jewish friend, but he’s a good Jew.” The whole episode is really about the guy identified as “some lawyer.” He’s the guy who asks the questions that prompt Jesus’ story, and he’s the guy in whom we should probably see ourselves. So let’s call it the story of “The Humiliated Lawyer,” or I guess better, given that compassion of Jesus I talked about, “The Humble-ified Lawyer.”

Now to give you a good sense of the story, I could go into all the social and cultural background here. I could talk about the history of Samaria, and the expectations about priests and Levites, and how the Law of Moses did or didn’t apply to the scenario Jesus lays out here (nothing in the Law forbade the priest and the Levite from helping the man: quite the opposite) – but instead I am going to do my best to tell this story as a fully contemporary analogy. Now, no modern analogy can be exactly the same. Our personal and social and cultural particulars are different, so it might come out a little differently, and that’s fine. This way of telling the story was inspired by Amy Jill Levine, a Jewish scholar of the New Testament, who wrote a book called “Short Stories by Jesus,” that really helps Christians re-interpret the parables of Jesus in ways that are not antisemitic – which is sadly how we do all too often read them today. Here goes:

So, there was some guy, generally thought to know a bit about the Bible, let’s call him Mike - a liberal minded, woke and progressive guy, enraged at what the MAGA folks are doing to Christianity these days. He’s not too sure, though, what his liberal-mindedness has to do with is faith, so, he goes up to Jesus and asks, “O Spiritual One, what do I need to do to get into heaven?” And Jesus says, “Well, what’s in the Bible? What’s your take on it?”

And in reply Mike says, “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 answer correctly; do this and you shall live.”

But Mike, wishing to make sure what he was already doing was good enough, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

Taking up this issue, Jesus said, “A guy was travelling from Washington back to Cambridge after a big

protest on the National Mall. Along the way, he stopped to help someone whose car appeared to have broken down, but it turned out to be a scam, and some guys robbed him, beat him to a pulp, and stole in his car, leaving him on the side of the road, half-dead.

After a bit, one of the first people to pass the scene was one of the keynote speakers from the big protest in Washington. She slowed down, but ended up driving by, because it was just too dangerous to get involved.

Not much later, one of the behind-the-scenes organizers of the rally came by, slowed down, but then figured surely the guy was already dead, and it wouldn't do any good to stop. Someone else would take care of it.

Before long," Jesus continued, "this guy driving a Tesla "cyber truck" and wearing a MAGA hat came by. He slowed down, looked at the scene, then stopped, and got out of his car. He found that the unfortunate guy was still alive, called 911, started washing the blood off the guy, and held him in his arms. "Come on, stay with me, guy, stay with me."

He helped the EMTs get him into the ambulance and followed them right into the ER. He told the charge nurse, "Look, I don't know who this guy is. He could be an immigrant for all I know. But I am going to stay with him to make sure he's alright. I know how hospitals are run these days, and you better not send him out before he's ready. If he doesn't have insurance, I'll pay for everything."

Jesus took a long pause, and said to liberal Mike: "Who of these three does it seem to you was a neighbor to the man who was scammed, robbed, and beaten?" Mike said (in a dejected tone), "The MAG..., the one treating him with mercy." And Jesus, looking him right in the eye, with piercing gentleness, said to him, "Go, and you do likewise."

I'm going to pause here for a minute and let that story settle on the room for a minute.

(Then begins an interactive time with the congregation...)

Now, how did that story make you feel? Emotions only, now. We are not great at this, but what's the emotion?

What did you notice in the story?

What sticks with you?

What questions would you like to ask of Jesus, the storyteller?...

(After the discussion time...)

Now I am not going to wrap this all up in a nice, neat package. That wasn't the goal of Jesus's parables. I think they were meant to unsettle us, and force us to live in that space, live with that discomfort, for a while. It's okay if we all hear something a little different today, based on who we are, our experiences, and our read of the world around us.

I'll just close by saying let's all remember Galatians 5:14: For the whole Law is summed up in a single utterance; "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

In the name of the Living God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Mother of us all. Amen.

