

Sermon on Ezra 4: 1-5 and Luke 10:25-37

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We have two scripture passages to guide our sermon time today. The story of the Good Samaritan is one of the best-known stories in the Bible, but the reading from the book of Ezra may be unfamiliar to you.

The parable of the Good Samaritan, which many of us have known since childhood, has become so familiar to us that many of us assume we have already discovered everything it has to teach us. We should help people in need- easy to understand- harder to do. But when Jesus taught in parables his point was not to make things easy to understand, but to add complexity, to challenge, and even to shock. Jesus didn't want to teach the people that you should help others, the Hebrew scriptures, our Old Testament is pretty clear on that point already. Jesus wanted to stir the pot enough so they would think about what they already knew in a new and different way. It wasn't answers he sought to provide, but new questions.

So the other thing about parables is they often followed forms of traditional stories.

Parables followed forms: So for example if I said, a priest, a rabbi, and a presbyterian pastor walk into a bar. For one thing, you know I'm telling a joke, and for another thing, you know that the punchline of that joke is going to be delivered by the presbyterian pastor, because of the form of the story. The same thing happens in the Good Samaritan parable, knowing that the third person was going to be the example, Jesus' original hearers would have been shocked to hear that that third person coming down the road was a Samaritan.

And so today listen to a part of our passage again and I'd like to invite you think about this old familiar story in a new way. I want you to listen for where you hear the shock or strangeness of this story.

"A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and took off, 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 upon him, and when he saw him he was moved with compassion. He went to him and the injured man immediately said, "Keep walking buddy! Get out of here! I do not want your help. I'm just gonna keep lying here until another priest or Levite comes by.

Ok, so I may have modified the story a little bit! But I did it to help this familiar parable speak to us whose ears are so used to hearing it! It seems absurd for the man lying in the ditch to turn away good help! It seems unthinkable for him to be choosy about who helps him at a time like this!

And yet, this is exactly what happened in our passage from Ezra this morning.

When approached by outsiders with an offer to help with the rebuilding of the temple, the priests and Levites reject the help out of hand.

In order to dig into the passage in Ezra, you'll need to know a little bit about the history of ancient Israel. So here's a very, very brief overview. The ancient near east had many tribes and kingdoms who were frequently at war with each, skirmishing for territory and resources. But superpowers emerged forming large empires and conquering smaller nations to add to their territory. Assyria, then Babylon, and then Persia. When the Babylonians conquered the people of Judah and destroyed the Temple, they were scattered to the far reaches of the empire away from their land, and their holy places. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah explore the story of what happened on the other side of that conflict. The Babylonians had fallen to the Persian Empire and King Cyrus had given permission for the people of Israel to return to their homeland. And so they are back in Jerusalem and they begin the rebuilding. When our passage begins the foundations of the temple have been laid. There is great excitement and joy, but it is also clear that their new normal will not be the same as the "glory days" they remember.

One thing that has changed- just as the Israelites were forcibly relocated, there were other peoples forcibly relocated to the lands of Israel and Judah. These people are identified in our passage this morning first as adversaries, but if you continue reading beyond the passage they are also called "people of the land" and the land is called Samaria. These adversaries are Samaritans- Good Samaritans! and they come to the Israelites extending a helping hand in a profoundly difficult time.

Unlike the Israelites, who continued to worship the Lord even when they were in lands where the people worshiped other gods, these people, the Samaritans, adopted the Lord as their God when they were relocated to the land where the Lord was worshiped. But to those who have returned from exile, they can't help but see these folks as people who don't "get" it. The people of Israel have a long history with their God and the Samaritans aren't part of the history. Their people were not slaves in Egypt, they aren't descended from Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, they didn't wander in the desert for 40 years, they didn't yearn for the promised land and when it comes to building the sacred space where Israel meets with God- that should be between God and Israel. So Zerubbabel and the elders say They just aren't a part of our sacred work. And so rather than accepting the help they say absolutely not- this temple is not for you, this is for our people and we will be the ones to build it. That is how the first temple was and it's how the second will be.

So these people who could have been allies are about to become adversaries.

They will stop at nothing to stop the Israelites from rebuilding the temple. And they succeed. We learn that the construction is made to cease at the end of our passage today. They will eventually complete the project but not for decades and not until there is a new King of Persia. In fact this stirs a conflict that will continue through to the time of Jesus.

In fact what we see in Ezra is not so much a failure of compassion, but a failure of imagination. The Israelites are certain they know the correct way to proceed with the rebuilding of the temple and their kingdom. And the Samaritans just aren't part of that plan. They don't realize that they could use some help! That they're the man in the ditch in the parable.

This is perhaps the most dire consequence of the classic "But this is the way we've always done things!" Which is really just another way of saying- we don't need help. We don't need YOUR help and ideas- we just need to keep doing what we're doing. We just need to keep lying here in this ditch and wait for a Levite to come and help us out.

So if you come away from the sermon today think “Gee those Israelites sure were bone headed” then I haven’t done my job. Because I hope by now you’re starting to see that we can all relate to the Israelites in this story. We in the church often close ourselves off to imaginative possibilities, because we’re sure we know what needs to be done and we just don’t take the time to imagine a world where we let someone else help us to see differently, to do differently.

And what it comes down to is love. The parable of the Good Samaritan is told in response to the question ‘What must I do to inherit eternal life?’ The answer “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.”

In the passage that would have been preached on this morning, if Kim were here, Jesus says “If you love me, you will keep my commandments”- and those are the commandments he means. He goes on to speak about the Spirit of Truth which the world cannot receive because the world does not see or know him. And continues saying “In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you will live also.”

In other words the work of loving our neighbors amounts to seeing God in them. Allowing God to be revealed to us in the faces of the outsider, the unchurched, those who worship differently. It is the work of gracious imagination that creates space for difference and change, and conceives of a world in which all things are possible by God’s grace.

What if those Israelites in the ancient world had been able to see those Samaritan neighbors as a gift from God?

Who might be coming to us here at Market Square revealing God to us?

May we have the energy, intelligence, imagination, and love to see and know Christ our Lord.