

# Who is My Neighbour?

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 10 July 2016

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Pentecost 8C

Amos 7: 7-17; Luke 10: 25-37; Contemporary reading “*Compassion*”

From *The Prophetic Imagination* by Walter Brueggemann (see p 6)

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under “Sunday Reflections” tab

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Some weeks there is so much going on in the news that it is hard to know where to begin a sermon. The election results are becoming clearer, but whether actual government is possible will not be known for a while for us to find out. This week, more than 300 people killed by suicide bombings in Iraq just this week. Then the awful news of violence in the US. In Louisiana and Minnesota two more black men killed by police in situations where they were no threat to anyone. Then the horrific killing of five police officers by a sniper in Texas at the end of a Black Lives Matter protest. And the release of the Chilcot report, the UK government’s official analysis of the catastrophic decision to invade Iraq in 2003 - and its devastating verdict on the war: concluding that Saddam Hussein posed no imminent threat to the West, that war was avoidable, and that the chaos and rise in terrorism that followed invasion was inevitable.

Before 2003, there had never been a suicide bombing in Iraq. Now terror reigns.

We hear the Good Samaritan story again and we look for a kinder world, in interactions among persons, among races, among nations.

Twentieth century American author, Kurt Vonnegut, wrote a scene that sums up the heart of the Good Samaritan teaching. This quote from *God Bless You, Mr Rosewater* comes as part of a baptismal speech that Mr Rosewater says he's planning for his neighbour's twins. He's going to say:

*"Hello, babies. Welcome to Earth. It's hot in the summer and cold in the winter. It's round and wet and crowded. At the outside, babies, you've got about a hundred years here. There's only one rule that I know of, babies—God damn it, you've got to be kind."*

It's a strange speech to make over a couple of infants, but it's exactly the summary of everything that new members of the human race need to know. By narrowing down all his advice for the future down to a few simple words, Vonnegut emphasizes what's most important in life: *"babies, God damn it, you've got to be kind."*

Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan contains the essence of Christianity. And yet familiarity with it can breed our contempt and the parable is often reduced in simplistic terms to something like, *"Be nice like the Samaritan, not nasty like the religious people."*

The message is stunningly simple, but there is a twist. The character who asks the question: “*who is my neighbour?*” is usually described in English as a lawyer. But a better translation is “*scholar of the scriptures.*”

He is looking for a loop hole in Jesus’s tough teaching about the connection between eternal life and kindness. And yet on hearing that story of the Samaritan, he immediately grasps its meaning. Who was the neighbour? Apparently unable to say directly “*the Samaritan,*” he replied “*The one who showed kindness and mercy.*”

He breaks through all the religious legality of his training by naming kindness as the true mark of the neighbour.

Jesus explains the heart of living well in a way that makes perfect sense for harsh times, and for our world driven by greed, competition and individualism. A world so often lacking in mercy, compassion, and forgiveness.

“Babies, God damn it, you’ve got to be *kind.*”

In the same novel, Vonnegut coined a word for the failure to live with an orientation toward kindness. He called it Samaritrophia, by which he meant the atrophy of kindness. Vonnegut says Samaritrophia manifests itself as “*hysterical indifference to the troubles of those less fortunate than oneself.*” It is the deadening of conscience. A person afflicted by Samaritrophia follows the path of enlightened self-interest. His flag, Vonnegut says, is the black and white Jolly Roger with these words written beneath the skull and crossbones: ‘*The hell with you, Jack, I’ve got mine.*’

Being a Good Samaritan is not just a personal calling, it is a political mandate and it was blindingly absent in the decisions of Bush and Cheney, Blair and Howard to go to war in Iraq.

They ignored the voice of conscience calling them to empathy, which would have saved the lives of tens, if not hundreds of thousands of people, and in its place the voice of self-interest reigned.

Matthew Fox expands the meaning of kindness in his definition of compassion. He says, “*Compassion is not pity... It is not feeling sorry for someone. Compassion is about feelings of togetherness. And it is this awareness of kinship or togetherness that urges us to seek after justice and do works of mercy.*”

This is the essence of the parable. But there is a disturbing twist.

Who was the Samaritan?

The radical nature of the parable has become domesticated by our familiarity with it. *Good* and *Samaritan* have become so elided that we miss the power and the irony of the combination that would have seemed completely outrageous to Jesus’ hearers. We miss the tension and the threatening challenge.

In the world in which Jesus lived, a chasm of stereotypical prejudice separated Jews from Samaritans. John Spong says that the Jews regarded the Samaritans as ‘*half breed heretics.*’ Jews would not eat with Samaritans. They would not worship together despite both being descendants of Abraham and Sarah; they would not intermarry, or even share the same physical space if they could possibly help it. And the contempt was mutual.

Yet in this story, Jesus taught that a Samaritan, acting out the claims of the law in terms of showing compassion, was more deeply a child of Abraham and Sarah, than even the priest or the Levite.

The parable could be told for us in Sydney in 2016 with the part of the Samaritan played by an alcoholic homeless person or a person seeking asylum who arrived here by boat.

This story is not just a radical statement about showing compassion, but it's also about barrier-breaking inclusion, which dramatically expanded and expanded the meaning of kindness and love.

The religious scholar's first question to Jesus was actually about eternal life, not about the greatest commandment. He is led by Jesus to answer it himself. But he cannot accept his own answer.

So he asks another question: "*Who is my neighbour?*" In response to the second question, Jesus tells this parable that is so familiar to us. It is set, like so many of Jesus' parables, in a commonplace situation, a journey on a dangerous road. The behaviour of the priest and the Levite would have been understandable to Jesus' hearers for several reasons. In our terms a Levite was like someone on the Church Council, someone who has a position of responsibility within the religious community, who would have understood the expectations of the faith.

But the priest and the Levite were responding to another drive within the religious community that was stronger than the call to mercy or compassion: the quest for purity.

That man on the side of the road may have been dead. Dead bodies were ritually impure and contact with the dead could have excluded them from temple practice for a period of time.

The ugliness of their neglect is highlighted when, surprisingly, it is a Samaritan who is the one who is unselfish, concerned, attentive, and caring. The one who 'came close'.

From the Jewish point of view, the Samaritan was the opposite of the religious scholar - and the priest and the Levite. Anyone else might have been that third character coming along the road to Jericho. But Jesus' choice of the Samaritan, the ultimate outsider, would have been shocking.

Jesus twists the question from "*Who is my neighbour?*" to "*who proved to be my neighbour?*"

In the way he spoke and the way he lived, Jesus invites us to face up to our prejudices. The way he included women and Samaritans and sinners rippled out through the early church's encounter with Gentiles, and on through the ages, as the church has confronted prejudice in the form of slavery, racism, sexism, economic injustice, and homophobia.

Table fellowship with the ritually impure was a central feature of Jesus' ministry. The 'sinners' that Jesus ate with had been placed outside the holiness code of Israel, as it was being interpreted in Jesus' time. To include such outsiders in the realm of God was to reject the views of those who valued separation from the uncleanness of the world.

In his table communion with social outcasts Jesus lived out the dawning age of forgiveness and inclusion and welcome. According to Marcus Borg, Jesus deliberately contravened the holiness code of the Pharisees and other groups in Judaism. Jesus appears not to have agreed that one achieved holiness by separation from the unclean. He rejected the notion that external things defile or pollute a person's essential being.

By violating the laws of purity, and in the telling of this story with an unclean hero and an unclean victim, Jesus was announcing that God was not concerned with being clean, but with loving-kindness for the marginalized and the rejected. God's heart aches on behalf of the uninvited and the unloved.

So the story of the 'good' Samaritan is not simply a story about how to be good or compassionate, though it is surely that.

It is also a story about who is compassionate, about who might be included in the communion of God. It invites us to look for the presence and activity of the holy in surprising people and unexpected places.

It invites us to face our prejudices, to join in extending the ripples from a stone cast by Jesus and his friends 2000 years ago.

Who are our Samaritans? Which group of people do we judge rather than understand?

The homeless? The imprisoned? The refugee? People with disabilities? People with mental illness? People dependent on welfare benefits?

You will all have your own answer as to who those people are for you.

This is a story for people who recognise that they are on a journey—not just a journey from birth to death, but from birth to rebirth, from partial life to abundant life. The gospel proclaims that what God pours into the lives of all who journey in a dangerous world, if we are but open to receive.

The Samaritan (that we are called to be) does not pass by. The Samaritan draws close. Draws close, "moved by compassion," moved by the Spirit of God poured into his or her heart, to cross over to where the injured one lies. Seeing the injured one alive and human, oil is poured to cleanse the wounds, and wine to dull the pain; the injured one is picked up and taken to an inn, and the debt is taken care of. This Samaritan has already received, is already living, eternal life.

To love God, is to love neighbour, is to love God. The ongoing flow of love allows eternal life to begin, here and now.

This story is for our journey, guiding us in the only direction the Sacred Source of Life desires—the way of love and compassion and inclusion for others. This is more than a parable about a helpful stranger; it is about the transforming power of God at work in those who travel the dangerous road of our world, moving us and all creation into the fullness of life; into the fullness of eternal life, here and now.

Jesus in his solidarity with the marginal one is moved to compassion. Compassion constitutes a radical form of criticism, for it announces that the hurt is to be taken seriously, that the hurt is not to be accepted as normal and natural but is an abnormal and unacceptable condition for humanness. . . .

It is instructive that in the teaching of Jesus it is precisely his two best-known parables that contain the word [compassion] under discussion. First, in the narrative of the Good Samaritan it is the Samaritan who has compassion (Luke 10:33). Second, in the story of the prodigal son, it is precisely the father who has compassion (Luke 15:20). Clearly the key person in each of these parables embodies the alternative consciousness from which the dominant consciousness is criticized. Both the Samaritan and the father are Jesus' peculiar articulation against the dominant culture, and so they stand as a radical threat. The Samaritan by his action judges the dominant way by disregard of the marginal. The ones who pass by, obviously carriers of the dominant tradition, are numbed, indifferent, and do not notice. The Samaritan expresses a new way that displaces the old arrangements in which outcasts are simply out. The replacing of numbness with compassion, that is, the end of cynical indifference and the beginning of noticed pain, signals a social revolution.

Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2d ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), pp. 88, 90-91.

