

**Colossians 1: 15-28**  
**Luke 10: 25-37**  
**Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church**  
**July 18, 2010**

Labels are dangerous and not just the bad ones. For years we have heard this parable and with a sigh of satisfaction thought, “Ah, the parable of the Good Samaritan!” And with the comfort of familiarity we hear the expected story and receive the expected message.

So, what’s wrong with that?

The problem is this: We have no idea whether the Samaritan is *good* (whatever that means.) He may be a serial killer. He might have embezzled thousands of dollars from a school lunch program. He may be an atheist or a loan shark. We have now way of knowing. The fact is that for Jesus, his “goodness” and virtuous motivations have nothing to do with it.

The story is told in answer to a question: “But who is my neighbor?” This question comes from an even deeper question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” When the story is told, Jesus asked, “Who *acted as neighbor* to the man who fell among robbers.”

Friends, at the risk of offending you let me suggest that *being good* has nothing to do with Jesus’ teaching. It is all about *being neighbor*. It is all about doing the right thing regardless of whether we think of ourselves as being good.

Why is this so important? There are many reasons; but let me pick one:

We live in a culture that makes a virtue of “being good.” We don’t define what “being good” means. My impression is that being good most of all involves being obedient to the stated and unstated rules of family, church and community. Being good means not upsetting anybody, trying to please other people—basically, getting along.

There you have in a nutshell the autobiography of Stewart Eugene Pattison. Please, don’t let me give you the wrong idea. It is not “bad” to be “good.” But when *being good* becomes our highest aim, it becomes a prison which leads to anger, frustration, resentment, jealousy, bitterness and finally rebellion.

When Jesus identified the hero of the story as a Samaritan he was not saying that the Samaritan was a good person. He was intentionally exposing the trap of *official* goodness. We see this in Jesus’ response to the lawyer’s question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” He asks, “What is written in the Law (of Moses)?” The lawyer rattles off the “right” answer: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” Imagine the twinkle in Jesus’ eye when he said with a straight face, “You are right! Do this and you will live!”

I propose to you that the lawyer was hoping that knowing the commandments and trying to obey them (within limits) was good enough to guarantee his place in heaven. In short that it was enough to try “to be good.” But Jesus’ reply puts the lawyer on his guard. He rightly senses that there is more to Jesus’ response than meets the eye.

*Can it be that he realizes that it is impossible for a human being to love God with one’s whole heart mind and strength? That at best our love of neighbor and self is partial and incomplete?*

Thus he asks, “But who is my neighbor?”

The word “good” never appears. Thus I say again, that the story of the Samaritan has nothing to do with being good. It has to do with *being neighbor*. It has to do with acting in the world as neighbor. That is the reply to the question, “But who is my neighbor?”

But remember that this all began with another, deeper question: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” From the subtle interplay between the lawyer and Jesus we suspect that inheriting eternal life is not accomplished by trying to be good. We are by nature incapable of completely fulfilling the command to love God with our whole selves. Call it Original Sin; call it fear, doubt, self centeredness... call it anything you want: the fact is that we are imperfect. On our own we will never love God completely. Throughout history the greatest spiritual leaders have confessed their inability to love God without qualifications. Indeed the closer they come to God the more they are aware of their falling short.

How then does this parable address the deeper question of our relationship with God? On the face of it, the frustrating fact is—it does not do so. There is no prescription here for guaranteeing eternal life.

However, what happens if we “good” people stop identifying with the so-called “good” Samaritan and shift to identify to the one left for dead by the side of the road? That one has been beaten up and left for dead by life. He cares nothing for being “good.” He is helpless and unless someone comes to his aid he will die. Unpleasant as it may be to imagine, the Gospel tells us that in the eyes of God we look more like the one by the side of the road than all the good people. God sees us beaten up by life. God sees us

helpless to do anything to save ourselves. God sees the good people going by and clicking their tongues while keeping their distance on the side of the road. The Gospel tells us that God's heart is filled with compassion.

So what does God do? He sends his Son Jesus to be the one to cross the road and personally see to our salvation. Jesus takes personal responsibility for reviving our souls and giving us new life. Jesus does whatever it takes to restore us so that we are no longer people who are beaten by life but now are redeemed. We now stand tall and are people of value.

People who are redeemed and have a new life know that this has nothing to do with their own goodness. It has everything to do with God's goodness in Jesus Christ. People who have felt the restoring touch of the Master's hand now sing a new song, a song of praise where before there was a song of fear and helplessness.

We have been redeemed from the side of the road are so much more than good that it no longer occurs to us to try to be good. It is enough to live the life of our Savior and to see others as we have been seen and, with full and compassionate hearts, love as we have been loved. Amen.