

Luke 10:25-37
A Sermon Preached by Ashley DeTar Birt
For the occasion of the ordination of Jenny Hardin
December 2, 2018
First Presbyterian Church, Springfield, IL

How do I know that Jenny Hardin is ready for ministry? I know she went to seminary and received her degree. I know she worked her way through the ordination process...and she found a call! I know she did CPE, or clinical pastoral education for those of you who don't live your entire lives surrounded by acronyms. I know that the people in her life, even those who aren't Christian, saw that God has called her and supported her. I even know that her mom tells a story about how she once announced that she was "going to be a minister like Papa." I know all of these things, but they aren't the reasons I know that Jenny is ready for ministry. They tell me that Jenny WANTS to go into ministry. They even tell me that Jenny's jumped through all the hoops and has been deemed "qualified" to go into ministry. But they don't tell me she's ready. I know Jenny's ready because, when I asked her if she had any passages in mind that I should preach on, one of the items on her list was the story of the Good Samaritan.

If any story can remind us of what God's call to love REALLY means, it's the Good Samaritan.

This is one of those stories we're all probably familiar with. Honestly, if Troy came up here, and instead of reading the text, just said "today's story is the Good Samaritan," y'all probably would've filled in the blanks in your head. Guy gets robbed, left on side of the road, the folks who are supposed to help him don't but a random Samaritan does. The end. Maybe if you're an overachiever or a teacher or a pastor, you'd throw in the part about the lawyer asking the questions. It's a story that teaches us to treat others with kindness and love, to be helpful when someone needs it. Nice and easy, right? WRONG. This isn't just a story about being helpful. This is a story about showing love and compassion even when it's the hardest thing to do.

The last time I saw Jenny was at a More Light Presbyterians board meeting in my home church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. In the lobby of that church are photographs by an artist named Christopher Ruane. They were all contemporary portrayals of famous Bible images: Jesus offering his wound to Thomas, Peter denying Jesus, but the one that struck me most was the Good Samaritan. The background is a street corner in downtown Pittsburgh. In the street, a police car whizzes by. In the window, an upper middle class white man and his daughter look past the main action. Shadows appearing from the bottom suggest that folks can see what has happened, but either don't care or don't want to get involved. Slightly off-center is a white man in a suit, beaten, bloodied, pockets turned inside out, dollar bills and drops of blood decorating the sidewalk. The fact that he's downtown dressed like that likely makes him a businessman of some sort, and the person who is dressing his wounds might be considered his opposite. Young,

black, wearing a hoodie, he's the kind of person that, in different circumstances, might have that police car from earlier called on him by our victim for something as simple as walking down the street. And there's no way that this young black man, this "good samaritan" doesn't know that. If the tables were turned, if he was the one lying in the street, well, he'd be dead. Shoot, his involvement right now could get him into trouble. And still, here he is, helping this man in his time of need.

A quick Google search of "Christopher Ruane Good Samaritan" will show you this exact photograph, and you're welcome to look it up after the service, but for right now, I want you to put yourself in the young man's shoes. I'm not saying you have to imagine yourself as a different race or age or gender. I'm simply asking you to take a moment and consider how he must've felt and who might make YOU feel that way. Who in YOUR life do you consider a threat, or a danger to you and your loved ones, or an enemy? Maybe it's a specific person who has made your life really, REALLY difficult, to the point that you're at your wits end. Maybe it's a group of people who have put roadblocks and barriers in your way, making it difficult to impossible to do what you need to do. Maybe it's participants in a system that labels and stereotypes you before they even get to know you. Maybe it's someone that you yourself have labeled and stereotyped before you've gotten to know them, for better or for worse. Take a moment and picture them in your head as detailed as I just described that photograph.

That person or people you just imagined, the feelings that came along with that? THAT is what the Good Samaritan story is about. We often talk about this passage as one about helping someone in their time of need, or of help coming from an unlikely source, but it's so much deeper than that. This is about letting the call to help, the call to love, be stronger than fear, than frustration, than animosity. This is about looking at the those you understand least, those who may have hurt you, and saying that you're going to love them anyway. It's not just some cutestory story we tell in Sunday School-and that's not knocking Sunday School, my ministry's with children, I teach Sunday School every week-but rather a true challenge for us to live into God's call to love regardless of the circumstances.

What exactly WERE the circumstances for Jews and Samaritans at the time? Well, that's complicated. Samaritans lived in Samaria, specifically in the tribal regions of Manasseh and Ephraim. Sources giving information on them either offer little or contradictory information, and few sources currently exist. For instance, Samaritan accounts insist that the Samaritans are direct descendants of the Northern Israelite tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh, while Jewish accounts, such as 2 Kings 17 or Josephus, state that the Samaritans are descendants of colonists brought by the Assyrians from conquered lands. Samaritan theology places a schism at the time of Eli moving the sanctuary, creating a divide between themselves and other Jewish descendants. Jews, on the other hand, designated Samaritans as Cutheans, not tribal descendants. So, right

from the jump, there's not even agreements on the origin of the Samaritans or what their relationships to Israelites even was.

As for their history of conflict? Well, according to Ezra 4, Samaritans supposedly opposed both the rebuilding of the temple and the rebuilding of the walls during the Persian period (though it's noteworthy that this was probably a political as opposed to religious conflict). There were reportedly disputes about the location, issues with the political leaders, and a lot of drama that ultimately led to a deterioration of the relationships between Jews and Samaritans, which really only benefited the Persians because it lessened the chances of the two groups rebelling. This bled into the Hellenistic period, in which Jews remained loyal to Persia and Samaritans supported Alexander the Great and the Seleucids in the Maccabean wars...until they revolted and he destroyed the city of Samaria. Tensions between Samaritans and Jews were still high, with Jewish governor and high priest John Hyrcanus both destroying the Samaritan sanctuary and overrunning Samaria 200 years after Alexander did. Oh, and he enslaved the Samaritans.

By the time we get to the Roman period, the hatred is still running deep. Around the time that Jesus was born, the Samaritans even defiled the Jewish temple by scattering the bones of dead people in the sanctuary. With a history like that, it's no surprise that there was no love lost between these two groups of people.

It's easy to think of conflicts in our world today. The history of this country is one of racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, bigotry, and genocide. It's the story of people oppressing other people even when both groups are victims of oppression by those in power. Our current state of affairs involves new awful revelations and abuses every week. The Church has and, sadly, continues to hurt people based on stereotypes and attitudes about what someone looks like, who someone is, and who someones loves. And that's not even taking the personal into consideration, because while these systemic problems can be detrimental, individuals feuding with us, fighting with us, getting in our way, trying to put us down or bring us down, that can have just as large of an effect in our lives. We all can put ourselves in the place of the Samaritan; someone who comes face to face with the exact kind of person they hope to avoid.

And yet the Samaritan helps anyway! He doesn't ignore the man because of the history of rejection and conquering that Samaritans have faced. He doesn't look at this guy and think "oh, his ancestors did stuff to my ancestors, I'mma let him sit there." He doesn't even walk on by out of fear that being near this person could actually be dangerous for HIM. Is he thinking any of that? I dunno, the text doesn't say. COULD he be thinking any of this? If we were in his shoes, would WE be thinking any of that? I know I would. Even if he is, he doesn't let that stop him from not just helping, but going above and beyond the call of duty. He bandages the man up, he puts him on his animal, he takes him to shelter, he pays the innkeeper and says he'll come back to pay more, ensuring that this robbery victim doesn't face more financial hardship. He shows us

that love, REAL love, the kind God commands us to show each other, is a force that can move us to truly look out for each other.

This is Jesus' answer to the lawyer's questions. Let's get one thing clear: the lawyer isn't asking these questions earnestly. It says that he stood up to "test" Jesus. The noun used is *ekpeirazó*, which means "to test thoroughly" or "to tempt". The only other time the word comes up in Luke is during the temptation of Jesus, where he cites Deuteronomy to say "You shall not test the Lord your God." This situation, much like the temptation, is meant to be a trap. Beyond that, it's also meant to gain information for selfish motives. "Who is my neighbor?" is actually asking the OPPOSITE. It's trying to figure out who he DOESN'T have to help. It's one of those questions meant to draw the line so when you come right up next to it and get called out, you can put your hands up and say "Hey, now, I didn't do anything wrong! I'm supposed to look after my neighbor, but pshh, that guy's not my neighbor."

Jesus doesn't ask the lawyer to identify who HIS neighbor is. He asks him to identify who was a neighbor to the man in the story. Rather than give him an easy, neat explanation that he can use as his own mental cheat-sheet, Jesus gives him an example of someone bending over backwards for someone he didn't know, probably didn't trust, probably didn't like. The HARDEST person to help considering the circumstances. When Jesus asks who was a neighbor, the lawyer responds "the one who showed him mercy." And Jesus tells him to "go and do likewise." Not only is that not an easy, neat explanation, it's not even an answer to the question. The lawyer asked "who is my neighbor?", but Jesus responds by showing him HOW to be a neighbor.

To be fair, Jesus DOES technically answer who the lawyer's neighbor is, too. You see, because both the lawyer and the man in the parable are presumably Jewish, to "go and do likewise" as the Samaritan did means to follow in the footsteps of someone the lawyer would consider his own enemy. And if he is to follow in the footsteps of someone he'd consider his enemy, then it goes without saying that there is a respect owed to that Samaritan. There is a value in him and his actions that is worth the man taking up himself. In other words, he must respect this Samaritan as himself. He must value this Samaritan as himself. And if the Samaritan is the one who has acted as a neighbor, and the command is that we love our neighbors as ourselves, well, then, he must LOVE this Samaritan, love someone he doesn't like, as himself.

And this is why I know Jenny is ready for ministry. Because when I asked what I should preach on, her suggestions (and this wasn't the only one) all lifted up a message of love. Not an easy, sweet kind of love that makes us feel good about ourselves, not a "we are the world" kind of love that ignores our differences, but a rough, tough, difficult love that tells us we have to look at those we're in conflict with, those who frustrate us, even those who hurt us, and treat them with compassion and mercy. That doesn't mean not acknowledging the hurt, that doesn't mean forgiving just for the sake of forgiving, but it does mean looking at each and every person we

meet and seeing them as a worthy, beloved child of God, deserving of grace and dignity and love. It means looking out for folks even when society tells you not to, even when you might not want to, even when they give you good reason not to want to. It means looking at everyone, even people you don't like, as your neighbor. And if that's the call you're ready to lift up and take on, Jenny? Well, then, you're not just ready for ministry. You're already doing it.