

“Who is Good?”

Today’s Old Testament and Gospel lessons were written down about 800 years apart. Yet, both include men whom people called prophets. Both also include people who we called Samaritans. Some of this is not obvious so let me begin with a little biblical history lesson.

The prophet Amos lived in the mid-8th century BCE. At this time the Kingdom of Israel had been divided into northern and southern kingdoms. The northern kingdom was called Israel and the southern kingdom was called Judah. Both kingdoms considered themselves the true descendents of Abraham. Both considered the other group apostate. That is that they had abandoned the true teaching of YHWH.

While God has not given up on either group, at the time of Amos God is especially unhappy with the northern kingdom of Israel. God calls Amos, a herdsman and fig tree dresser who lives in Judah, to prophesy against the northern kingdom. As you can imagine Amos is not received well by those in the north. His prophecy is that the leaders and the wealthy in the northern kingdom are taking advantage of the poor, mistreating widows and orphans, stealing from those impoverished, and hoarding the riches of the land for themselves.

No one likes to be told they are bad and especially by an outsider. The part of the Book of Amos we heard today is what I call the “Prophet Fight at the Temple Bethel.” Amos, the true prophet of God, duels with Amaziah, the professional prophet who is paid to tell the king what he wants to hear. It is rather fun to watch them trading insults.

While there is some disagreement about the fulfillment of Amos’ prophecy, it is true that the northern kingdom is overthrown by the Assyrian Empire and the people of the northern kingdom scattered. By Jesus’ time this area is called Samaria and the people who remain there are called Samaritans. They are still at odds with the Jews of Israel over their religion, which holy mountain is the right one and who are the true descendants of Abraham. They consider each other enemies.

In today’s gospel lesson from Luke, when the young lawyer comes to Jesus and asks who is his neighbor the last thing he would expect to hear is that a Samaritan is neighbor to him. Yet when the young man seeks to justify himself before Jesus, Jesus tells him a story about a man who is beaten and robbed and left for dead beside the road. It is an important road that connects Jerusalem and Jericho. It was heavily traveled by pilgrims, merchants, and public officials. It was also known to be a place where bandits hid out waiting for unsuspecting victims to come along.

As a Jew of that time might expect in a parable, three different classes of people come along. The familiar trope was Priest, Levite and Israelite because that was how Jewish society was divided up. Sure enough the priest comes along, but rather than caring for the injured man he hurries by. The Levite does the same thing. Jesus does not tell us why they do not stop, just that they do not. Two holy men who should have stopped to help the victim do not do what is right. It is also worth noting that both men are going down the road. That is that they were coming from Jerusalem.¹ The

¹ One always goes up to Jerusalem and comes down from Jerusalem. Even if one parachutes into Jerusalem they have still gone up. If one leaves by rocket ship from Jerusalem you have still gone down.

implication is that they have in a sense just left worship and yet they did not do the Torah calls them to do.

As the story continues a third man comes along. Jesus' listeners are expecting the third man to be a common Israelite and regular Jew just like themselves. This man of the people will come along and do the right thing. However, the third man is not a Jew but one of the hated Samaritans. One can almost feel the gasp of shock from the listeners as they hear that a Samaritan has come along. If the holy men did not do the right thing what can we expect of a Samaritan?

But Jesus tells us that the Samaritan was "moved by pity." He did not pass by but did the best he could to care for the man's injuries and then took him to an inn where he could be nursed back to health. He gives the innkeeper payment to cover expenses and promises to reimburse him for further expenses when he comes back. This gesture insures the man will be nursed back to health, because the Samaritan is coming back to check.

Over the centuries the meaning of Good Samaritan has become someone who does the right thing, perhaps without regard for his or her own safety. Sometimes we get the sense that the Good Samaritan might even be someone from the wrong side of the tracks. That is one that we do not expect to do the right thing, because they are not as good as we are.

However, what Jesus was saying to the young lawyer and the rest of his audience is that the one who is neighbor to you may actually be the one you think of as your enemy. New Testament scholar Amy Jill Levine says to update the Good Samaritan story we might want to call it the Parable of the Good terrorist that is a member of Hamas, ISIS or al Qaeda. The Samaritan is not just the unexpected helper, but the one whom we expect to do his worst, one who is our sworn enemy.

The young man wanted to know who he was supposed to treat as his neighbor. Jesus turns the tables and asks him who he would want for a neighbor, unhelpful holy men or a compassionate enemy. Jesus ends his parable saying, "Go and do likewise." That is, emulate the one moved by pity and care for all who are in need.

We live in a fractured and broken world where even little children trying to escape murder, drugs, and terrorism are seen as our enemies, and where the color of a person's skin automatically marks them as a likely criminal. As followers of Jesus we are called to do good even to the ones we consider our enemies. We are called to look after everyone because we are all children of God. All lives, even those of our real or imagined enemy, are no less valuable than yours or mine in the sight of God.

As people who profess to follow the teachings of Jesus we must care for the poor, the widowed, the orphaned, the immigrant and even our enemy in spite of our fears and in spite of our politics. We do not have a choice. It is as simple as that. Otherwise, when we leave this place we are no better than the Priest or the Levite who, going down from Jerusalem, passed by on the other side leaving a child of God in pain and near death for their enemy to save.