

Taking Religion Seriously

Presented By Pastor Scott Walters on 07-14-19

At Crossroads United Methodist Church

Waunakee, WI

Jesus had a knack for getting to the heart of the matter. When someone asked our Lord how he could consider himself a follower of God and spend so much time with Godless people, Jesus told of a father who had two sons. One son ruined his life in a distant country; the other son stayed at home with an acid heart. The father celebrated the return of the one son; I'm not sure that he ever did connect with the older son – and it makes one wonder which of his two sons is really the prodigal.

When our Lord met people who had great promise but could not produce, he talked about fig trees with leaves, but no fruit

But seldom was a point so well made as when a learned theologian sought to engage Jesus in debate; indeed, one translation says, "sought to trap him." The question is the most profound of 'faith questions.' "Teacher, what do I need to do to inherit eternal life?"

This situation is somewhat silly: it's as if the seminary professor were asking the first year student about the dimensions of eternal life. We'll never know if it was an attempt to humiliate Jesus, but we can assume that here is a person who sees religion as an affair of debatable theories. Today, he confronts the amateur, Jesus.

But Jesus responds like it was a rhetorical question: "You know the answer to your question; what does our tradition say?" And the seminary professor is left to quote scripture about love of God and neighbor. "So," replies Jesus, "do that you will find the peace you seek."

But our theologian feels a little foolish at having asked what appears to be a simple-minded question, and so he continues. "And just who is my neighbor? he asks. "Is it those who share my culture or my politics? Is it those who are United Methodist or Christian, or Wisconsinites? Where does one draw the line?" He seeks an answer with which he can quibble.

But Jesus tells a story that ends the debate for all time. There was a traveler, beaten, robbed and thrown into a ditch; two men of religion passed by him. A social outcast stopped, bound the wounds of the man, delivered him into the hands of others who could care for him, and paid the bill. Then the amateur asked "the pro," "Who was the neighbor to the one thrown in the ditch?"

"The one who showed him kindness," was the reply. "Good," said Jesus, "and do as he did."

And this brings us to the heart of the biblical faith. The measure of our faith is the doing of mercy and the showing of kindness. Ours is not a faith for seminary professors only. Because our faith is not a body of doctrine, but a matter of mercy. We are judged on whether we act like the Samaritan.

Now, that's easy to say, but hard to do. There are those, for instance, who would make Christianity not so much a matter of mercy, but rather, only a matter of personal salvation. Sure, there is an important place in the Gospel for opening our hearts to the love that God has you. And yet, the sign of our being in Christ doesn't have to do with the date on which Jesus came into our hearts, but rather by the decisions we make about, and how we treat other people – especially those disregarded by others.

Our religious professional has no doubt that there are limits – perimeters – to who qualifies as a neighbor. And what Jesus implies in his parable comes as a shock to the assumption there is a limit as to who is a neighbor.

You see, Jews and Samaritans despised each other. They were thought to be moral and ethnic opposites. Today, Jesus makes what, for Jews, is the virtual incarnation of evil itself: a Samaritan – into the virtual incarnation of goodness itself: a good Samaritan.

Taking Religion Seriously

The person of one extreme, a member of ISIS, takes care of, goes above and beyond the call of duty to a person of the opposite pole; say, a Westerner or an American.

And with the stakes pulled from the boundaries of personal concern, we can no longer say, "Take care of our own first," whether that means our own nationality, our own faith, our own race, our own sexual orientation, or whatever."

Making our faith a matter of scoring debating points is no longer open to us. To take our faith seriously, is to show mercy and to do kindness to the widest possible variety of humankind; to the variety, as our Lord puts it, "which falls between the Samaritan and Jew. And that excludes no human problem, no personal need.

Let me suggest one more thing: if we were to see ourselves as persons dying and bleeding by the side of the road, we would discover what it means to take our faith seriously. For when we see ourselves as the one lying in a ditch, bruised and helpless, we catch a glimpse of what serious faith really means. For, in Christ, there is one who was not simply content to **tell** a parable about a Good Samaritan, but **was**

And that is why we are empowered to be Samaritans to others. We extend the boundaries of our concern because he has included within his boundaries the likes of you and me.

We enlarge the limits of our care for others because when he comes to meet our need, all limits are abolished. There is no condition he sets before salvaging us from the ditch; what can we do but, taking him seriously, salvage others? Amen.