

# Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from July 11, 2010

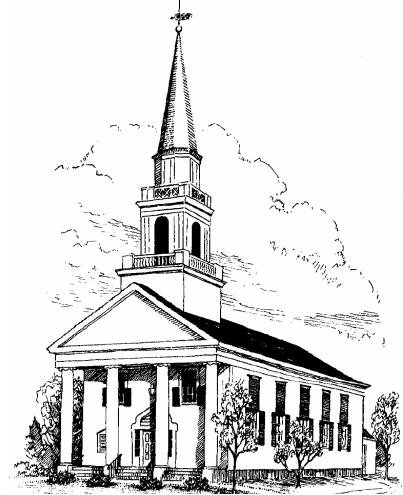
Ms. Jackie Phillips

## “MEETING the GOOD SAMARITAN”

Scriptures:

Deuteronomy 30:9-14

Luke 10:25-37



**G**ood Morning.

This isn't the first time I've preached here at the church I grew up in, but it feels a little different now that I have a year of seminary under my belt. Rather than simply share my own musings on faith and try to find a passage that will fit my thoughts neatly, I've begun to learn that I need to engage the Biblical text and extract teaching from it. As an experiment to see what it might be like to be a real preacher, I decided to preach on the lectionary text and hope for the best.

Fortunately for me, the reading for this Sunday is a parable we've all heard many times before. The story of the Good Samaritan is so well known that when one hears the word "Samaritan" she thinks of a compassionate and helpful person rather than an inhabitant of Samaria. There are countless organizations and charities named after the Samaritan.

Furthermore, preaching on this parable is timely for me because I just finished an ethics course on Agape. Agape, one of three Greek words for love, usually signifies neighbor love as opposed to eros (romantic love) or philia (friendship). All semester long we debated the question: who is the neighbor? My professor liked to add his own spin to the parable of the Good Samaritan – he would say – you're walking along the road and you see three people in need of immediate medical attention. One person is your spouse. The other is the lead researcher on an initiative that is close to curing cancer. The third – a convicted felon – is closest to death. Who do you save? Do you save the person that is most dear to your life? Do you help the person who could save many other lives? Is there a moral imperative even to save the felon?

Most of the conversations that followed were way over my head, and most of the time I felt that the whole class was just missing the point. I suppose there is a need for the ethicists of the world to debate the nitty gritty of neighbor love, if you're into that sort of thing. But for me the parable has a pretty straightforward and simple message.

Let's take a look at the story. The parable of the Good Samaritan is Jesus' response to a test set forth by a skeptical lawyer. The lawyer asks Jesus, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus turns the question back to the lawyer, testing his knowledge of scripture. The lawyer correctly quotes Deuteronomy: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."

Matthew and Mark relate similar interactions in which a Pharisee or lawyer asks Jesus what the greatest commandment is, and his answer is the same. But Luke's story adds an important element when the lawyer persists in asking, "But who is my neighbor?" The parable of the Good Samaritan is Jesus' response to the lawyer's question.

Now we've all just heard the parable and it probably wasn't the first time you've heard it. But we're so used to hearing about the Good Samaritan that we may have lost an appreciation for just who the Good Samaritan was. Jesus tells of "a certain man" who has been robbed and assaulted on the notoriously dangerous road from Jerusalem to Jericho. We aren't told anything about this man – not what he looks like, his religion, or where he is from – all we know is that he is in need. Along comes a priest, one who would be expected to help this poor man. In fact, regardless of his other priestly responsibilities, if a priest found a corpse along his journey he had a duty to bury it. Yet this priest kept walking. Next a Levite walks by – a member of the priestly tribe of Israel. Like the priest, the Levite passes without helping the injured man. You might expect the third man walking by to be an Israelite to show that a common Israelite would be more compassionate than even a priest or Levite from the priestly tribe. But the third character is completely shocking – he is a Samaritan. Again, because we are so used to hearing the phrase "good Samaritan" we forget why his identity as a Samaritan is so shocking.

Samaritans and Israelites did not generally get along. Samaritans were thought of as unclean because they were descendants of mixed marriages that took place after the fall of the Northern kingdom. From an Israelite's perspective, a Samaritan was probably the last person that would stop and help the man on the side of the road. But not only did this Samaritan stop and help, he took extensive care of the man, cleaning his wounds and paying for his stay at an inn where he could recover.

Now as I said, we don't know whether the injured man was an Israelite – but that doesn't matter – all that matters was that he was in need. After sharing the parable Jesus again returns the question to the lawyer and asks him, which one of these three men was a neighbor to the man who was robbed? The lawyer answers that the neighbor is the man who showed him kindness and Jesus responds "go and do as he did."

Jesus did not pick the three passersby at random – he intentionally crafted the story to shake up the social boundaries that were in existence under Israelite law. By making the hero of the parable the unexpected Samaritan, Jesus erased the lines of race, religion, and region and made the neighbor a universal category – all those in need are my neighbor. And from my reading, this parable is very much in line with the general message of the gospel in which story by story, Jesus denies the standing social order.

Luke includes the story of the Good Samaritan to illustrate neighbor love and follows this parable with the tale of Mary and Martha in which Mary learns the importance of love for the Lord. In the twin stories which illustrate the two most important commandments, the main character is unlikely – in Mary's case a woman. Again Jesus surpasses the Israelite social order – here a woman is deemed worthy of the Lord's exclusive attention and teaching.

Because we are so used to hearing the familiar parables, we often forget just how radical Jesus' message was during the time he taught. Jesus' highlighting Samaritans and women as righteous was completely unexpected and opposed to the social order. In "The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus" Peter Gomes attempts to remind his audience just how scandalous Jesus message is and he urges us not to lose the radical nature of his message. He writes, "I suggest that Jesus came into the world not as a Bible teacher directing us back at the text, but as one who proclaimed a realm beyond the Bible. He proclaimed good news against the conventional wisdom of his day, taking up with unacceptable people and advancing dangerous, even revolutionary ideas, nearly all of which remain to be discovered and acted upon." Further, he asserts that, "The times in which Jesus did his preaching and teaching were remarkably similar to our own... Then, as now, the world found it easier to deal with bad news or conventional wisdom, and thus resisted the in-breaking of anything new or confrontational."

These words have had special significance and have taken on new meaning for me in my journey at seminary and especially in the last few months. The radical theme of helping the neighbor in need regardless of race, gender, or religious affiliation has emerged as the central gospel message speaking to me, and I'm trying to figure out what that means in my life. Who are my neighbors in need? What unlikely Samaritans have come to my aid in times of distress?

This summer I have been blessed with the opportunity to meet some new neighbors who have helped me learn what it means to follow the parable of the Good Samaritan. I'm doing an internship through my school called Leadership in Public Ministry and the goal is to learn about how social change happens in faith-based groups. I was assigned to Saint Rose of Lima Catholic Church in Faith Haven, CT.

Saint Rose is five minutes from East Rock, the quiet neighborhood where I and many other Yale students live. On my quick drive to Fair Haven, I literally cross a bridge that brings me into what feels like another world. In Fair Haven you are more likely to hear Spanish than English, and the bustling streets and bakeries remind me more of a Latin American town than New Haven, Connecticut. Saint Rose is in the middle of the action – a large parish that sees about 1,200 people every Sunday. Father Manship, a Connecticut native, offers mass in both English and Spanish.

Saint Rose parishioners are largely Latino immigrants, mostly from Mexico, Guatemala, and Ecuador, but also representing 18 Spanish-speaking countries. I stuck out like a sore thumb at my first St. Rose Spanish mass where I had to introduce myself to the community - I'm not Catholic and don't know when to do what during mass and my Spanish is far from perfect. But I have been welcomed warmly by the St. Rose community. The model of community organizing that I'm learning teaches that building relationships is the foundation of social change and thus advocates engaging in many 1-1 relational meetings to learn about people's stories and what change they want to see in their lives.

I've been fortunate to experience many of these 1-1 meetings with St. Rose parishioners and hearing their stories has been eye opening. I met with a junior in high school who is taking four AP classes, has always achieved highest honors, and is a member of the National Honor Society. As I congratulated this young woman on her achievements she shared with me her fear that she won't be able to go to college because although she's lived in Connecticut since she was four years old she doesn't have US documentation making the next steps of college and a career nearly impossible. I couldn't help but think of how effortlessly I was able to make the transition from high school to college and then on to my masters program and left the meeting feeling incredibly sad that so many bright young students do not have the same opportunities that I have taken for granted.

I met with the owner of an Ecuadorian market whose customers are daily harassed by a corrupt police force in East Haven – one of whom was pepper sprayed by an officer while handcuffed. Now immigration is a touchy subject and we all have our own opinions and perspectives on it. I don't want to make this into a political and divisive message, but simply to share my experiences with this difficult topic. Regardless of our stance, I think we can all agree that police brutality is unacceptable, and I hope that most of us would advocate for educational opportunities for young people who had no say in their parents' immigration.

And yet, as I am hesitant to be overly political, I am reminded that Jesus was political – his message of radical inclusion shook the very foundations of Israelite society and the parable of the Good Samaritan is evidence of this. Again, regardless of our political affiliations, we can agree that the system of immigration is broken and our neighbors are suffering as a result. The system is broken and our neighbors need allies in fixing it.

Father Manship, the pastor of St. Rose, is a Good Samaritan of sorts. In other words, he might be thought of as the last person that would take it upon himself to help the struggling neighbors of Fair Haven. He is a Connecticut born man and was an engineer before he became a priest. He's learning Spanish but like me has a sort of awkward accent. Like the priest and Levite in the parable, he could have easily kept walking past Fair Haven and could have spent the rest of his life serving an affluent, white parish. But he decided to be the Samaritan, to stop on the side of the road and help his neighbor.

But instead of being praised for following Jesus' message of the Good Samaritan, Father Manship has been criticized by his Diocese for being "overly political." He explains how frustrated it makes him when people try to separate the spiritual from the temporal – he says, God was incarnated as a human being. That is central to our message of Christianity and shows that God cares about the temporal needs of humans. He quotes Brazilian Archbishop Dom Helder Camara, "When I feed the poor, they call me saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist."

Father Manship isn't about feeding the poor, he is about partnering with the poor to help them change the structures that keep them poor. He understands that Jesus' good news was about anything but the status quo – that it was about social change, erasing social boundaries, and embracing the universal neighbor.

And the people of Saint Rose should not just be seen as the needy neighbor suffering on the side of the road, they have also been Good Samaritans to me, pulling me out of my spiritual ditch, tending my wounds of frustration and anger, and helping me to understand Jesus' message more clearly even though I don't look or speak like them and even though I can cross the bridge back to cozy East Rock whenever things start getting too real.

We are the United Church of Christ. We proclaim that God is Still Speaking. What is God saying to us today? Who are our neighbors in need? Let us remember that Jesus spoke a radical message which should remain radical today. Let us remember that the neighbors that truly need our help are the ones we feel most uncomfortable reaching out to. Let us not forget that the words 'good' and 'Samaritan' did not always go hand-in-hand, but rather that the Samaritan was the most unlikely person to stop and help the man on the side of the road. The message of the universal neighbor is easy to understand but difficult to enact. Let us be thankful for the Samaritans that have attended to us, and let us not be afraid to be the Samaritan to others. They have a saying at Saint Rose: "En Dios, no hay extranjeros" – "In God, there are no strangers." The parable of the Good Samaritan helps us remember that no human being is a stranger to God. Amen.