

Samaritan? I Was Afraid He Said Syrian!

[Text - Luke 10:25-37]

Pastor Dave Shackle
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In this morning's New Testament reading, when an expert in religious law tries to test Jesus by asking, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus directs him back to his religious roots: "What is written in the Law? What do you read there?" The man cites the cornerstone of Hebraic Law: "You shall love the Holy One with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and you shall love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus replies, "Bravo! You have given the right answer; now *do* this, and you shall live!"

It's one thing to know what to do; *doing* it, is an entirely different matter. According to Jesus, and according to the core teaching of every major religion, the foundation for a full and meaningful Life - and the pathway to *everlasting* Life - is that we love our Divine Source, and that we genuinely love our neighbors as ourselves. "Do this, and you shall live!" So...all we have to do is to wholeheartedly love the unseen Source of this vast universe, *and* love our [potentially] contentious neighbors as we love ourselves? That sounds rather daunting! So perhaps we should approach this by considering how these three entities [God, neighbor, and self] are intricately interrelated - recognizing that this inter-connectedness may be the key to figuring-out how to truly love all three.

Let's start with the concept of loving *ourselves*. Oftentimes, self-love is mistakenly compared to, or confused with, selfishness. In some religious communities, there's a inclination to disdain self-love. The emphasis is placed on our human sinfulness and failings; which may appear to be humbly self-effacing, but is really of little benefit to ourselves, to others, or to God! Both ancient

Scripture and modern psychology remind us that we can't truly love others, until we learn to love and accept ourselves - until we understand that *all* Life is to be treated with dignity and respect, including our own! If you don't really love yourself, then what can you bring of value to your relationships with others? If I see myself as a miserable, worthless worm [as certain religious-teachings might suggest], then what can I possibly offer others? If you and I can't accept the totality of who we are, then how can we bring our authentic selves into any of our relationships - human or Divine?

Self-knowledge and self-love are crucial components in one's personal and spiritual development, as well as in a person's ability to relate to others in healthy and wholesome ways. *Truly* loving yourself will inspire you to be the best person you can be! And loving yourself isn't egotistical, as long as you acknowledge that all that you are is a gift from your Divine Source - a gift which has been augmented through your relationships with those around you. And the more you and I trust in the Divine goodness that is within us and around us, the more diligently we will strive to love our neighbor as ourselves - to treat that person beside us, whoever he or she may be, as we ourselves want to be treated. Doing this certainly takes commitment, effort, and a willingness to grow; which may be why that lawyer asks Jesus, "Who *is* my neighbor?" It's like he's trying to divert Jesus into a debate about societal boundaries or ethical considerations that can limit who that neighbor is. But Jesus doesn't give him, or us, an easy out. Instead, he blows our narrow definitions and boundaries wide open, by telling that marvelous story that is *now* known as "The Good Samaritan".

In First Century Israel, however, the words "good" and "Samaritan" just didn't go together. The people of Israel felt that their Samaritan neighbors to the North were far worse than most run-of-the-mill sinners! In fact, the whole Samaritan nation had essentially been excommunicated from the Hebrew Faith.

Samaritans were prohibited from worshiping in the Temple in Jerusalem, and all Jews were forbidden to have any social contact with them. That was the standing religious and cultural practice of the day; but it's a practice which Jesus obviously doesn't buy-into. Jesus goes into Samaria to proclaim the Good News of Divine Love and Grace for all people. He even stops and talks with a Samaritan woman, sitting by a well - a woman with *five* ex-husbands, who is currently living with a sixth man! Yet that doesn't stop Jesus from interacting with her. He sees her simply as a neighbor to whom he can extend Divine compassion and grace. And who knows? Maybe it's because of this encounter, that Jesus chooses as the unlikely hero of his story, a shady, suspicious Syrian refugee...I mean *Samaritan* reprobate!

"A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and left him half dead." And who comes to the rescue? Not a priest, not an expert in religious law, not the leader of "Israeli Citizens Against Samaritan Immigrants". No, the true neighbor of this person in need, is someone who the priest, the lawyer, and the upstanding citizen would find highly suspect, undesirable, and completely unworthy of any kind of admiration. So...who might that be today? I'll let each of us fill in the blanks for ourselves. Who might we judge as being unworthy? Who would you and I least expect to reach out to *us* in our time of need? Jesus says, '*That's* the person you need to envision as your neighbor!' And then Jesus calls each of us to become that same kind of compassionate neighbor to *all* those around us!

It's certainly not easy to love our neighbor as we love ourselves; especially when that neighbor is someone we tend to profile, or against whom we hold certain prejudices. However, when you and I remember that the reason we love, is because God first - and fully - loves us, then we will be compelled to make the effort. Rather than trying to determine who is worthy of God's love, or

our own, we will trust that the Divine Spirit lives and breathes in all of us. Therefore, if you and I truly want to embrace - and be embraced by - the Holy One, we will take that step of faith. We will open our hearts, and our hands, to reach-out to our neighbor in need - whoever that neighbor might be. And when we do this, Jesus says, we shall know what it is to truly live!