

Collaborators

Luke 10:25-37

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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²⁵Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ²⁶He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" ²⁷He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." ²⁸And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." ²⁹But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

³⁰Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³²So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. ³⁴He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. ³⁵The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' ³⁶Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" ³⁷He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise." (NRSV)

I

The parable of the good Samaritan might be Jesus' most famous parable. If you interviewed random people on the sidewalks of downtown Goshen and asked them whether they know Jesus' parable of the alert slaves in Luke 12:35-40, they'll probably stammer around a bit, then admit they don't know that parable. But if you ask those same people whether they know Jesus' parable of the good Samaritan from Luke 10, lots of them will perk up and say, "Yes, I know that one. It's about a kind man who helps other people, right?"

Suppose you interviewed Christians as they entered a church building on Sunday morning, and you informed them that the pastor is going to preach today on the parable of the good Samaritan. Some of them will probably groan under their breath. "Oh no," they might be saying to themselves. "Not *that* parable again. We already know we're supposed to be kind to strangers in need. Is there really anything new or interesting to say about that parable?"

So let us grant, you and I, that this parable is well-traveled territory. And yet for all of its familiarity, one feature of this story gets very little attention. Read most

commentaries, and they'll zoom right by it. Listen to most sermons, and they'll never call attention to it. Join in most Sunday school conversations, and they'll ignore it. I mean the innkeeper, who in risky, astonishing ways collaborated with the Samaritan to care for the wounded man. Most discussions of this parable highlight the virtuous actions of the Samaritan, and justly so. Yet the Samaritan also needed a collaborator in good deeds—a collaborator he found in the innkeeper. As we shall see, however, this was a delicate, risky partnership that required massive amounts of trust from both the Samaritan and the innkeeper.

II

It helps to get a feel for the visual landscape. Jesus says a man was traveling “down from Jerusalem to Jericho.” Down is exactly right. Jerusalem is located at an elevation of about 2500 feet, while Jericho is located at a much lower elevation of about 825 feet below sea level. This means the road from Jerusalem to Jericho drops 3,300 feet over a distance of about 17 miles. When the road first leaves the city of Jerusalem, it travels through a countryside of trees, shrubs, and other vegetation. But as the road continues to descend down to Jericho, most of the vegetation disappears and becomes wilderness. The road snakes through dry dirt and rocks, along empty hills, cliffs, and valleys. No one lives there permanently, because there's very little water. We'd call it a desert.

Given these desert conditions, we can guess that if there was any inn along this road, it was probably located on the outskirts of Jericho. Jericho was and still is an oasis in the middle of the desert. Life in Jericho was possible because it had a spring of water, sometimes called “Elisha's Spring,”¹ So when the Samaritan brings the wounded man to the inn, we should probably imagine that inn standing on the near side of Jericho, just as the road enters the town.

III

Now to the innkeeper himself. In general, innkeepers had terrible reputations in the ancient world. Writers of the time almost referred to innkeepers as dishonest, violent,

morally dubious. More to the point for this parable, innkeepers had a reputation for being people you could not, or at least should not, trust. The Greek philosopher Plato, for instance, accused innkeepers of charging exorbitant prices for lodging and food. The Jewish historian, Josephus, writing in the first century, pointed out that good Jews would not marry anyone who earned their living as an innkeeper. The Mishnah, a collection of Jewish writings from the first and second centuries, warned that you shouldn't leave your cattle with an innkeeper because he might commit the sin of bestiality; you shouldn't stay at an inn if you're a single woman because the innkeeper might rape you; and if you're a man, you shouldn't stay at an inn because you might get murdered. Common people accused innkeepers of serving wine diluted with water, and claiming it was pure wine. The most damaging accusation came from the famous Greek doctor, Galen, who claimed he knew of many innkeepers who got caught serving customers meat which the innkeeper claimed was pork, but was actually human flesh.² People in the ancient world thought innkeepers were low-down skunks. Supposedly you couldn't trust them.

IV

Yet that's exactly what the Samaritan does. When he arrives at the outskirts of Jericho with the half dead man slung across the back of his donkey, he pulls into the inn and embarks on a remarkable journey of trust with the innkeeper.

Out on the road, the Samaritan has already performed triage on the half dead man by treating his wounds with oil and wine. The alcohol in the wine would obviously act as a disinfectant, and the oil, probably olive oil, helped to keep the wounds soft and pliable. In a room at the inn, the Samaritan provides overnight nursing care. But because he has pressing business elsewhere, the Samaritan can't stay long. So the next morning he proposes a deal with the innkeeper. "I need to get back on the road," he says. "Would you be willing to take care of this chap while I'm gone? I'll pay your expenses. Here are 2 denarii as a deposit on the bill. However much more you spend on his care, I'll re-pay you when I come back this way."

Given the rotten reputation of innkeepers, the Samaritan is taking a big risk with this deal. Look carefully at verse 35, where he explicitly says: “I will repay you whatever more you spend” (NRSV). Essentially he’s handing the innkeeper a signed, blank check. He’s putting no limits on what the innkeeper can spend—8 denarii, 33 denarii, a 100 denarii. The innkeeper would have had lots of ways to take advantage of this open-ended arrangement. The innkeeper could inflate the bill. He could take the 2 denarii the Samaritan gives him and squander it on some frivolous expense. He could deliberately let the wounded man die and then charge the Samaritan for burial expenses. Yet despite these risks, the Samaritan places his trust in the innkeeper to act decently and honorably.

Now let’s look at this situation from the perspective of the innkeeper. He too is taking some big risks here. Even if he acts honorably, he has no guarantee the Samaritan is going to hold up his end of the bargain. The innkeeper could run up a sizable but legitimate bill in caring for this man, but never get reimbursed for it. The Samaritan could simply abscond and never come back to pay up. The Samaritan could get sick and be laid low for a long time. He could have a financial crisis that leaves him poor and unable to pay the bill. He could be killed out on the road somewhere, as the half dead man nearly was, and never show up again.

In other words, the Samaritan and the innkeeper both enter into a risky agreement. Either one of them could get shafted. There are no guarantees here; each of them is essentially agreeing to trust each other.³

V

By the end of the parable, the Samaritan and the innkeeper have implicitly agreed to care for this wounded man until he returns to good health. We really should call this the “parable of the Good Samaritan and the Good Innkeeper,” because they collaborate in a treatment plan of compassion, mercy, and good nursing care.

This is more than a story about how to be a good person. Instead this is really a story about God’s new reign. It illustrates what Jesus came to proclaim in his speech and show in his actions. The Samaritan and the innkeeper act in ways that contradict normal

expectations. They do not behave like people assumed Samaritans and innkeepers would behave. Working as collaborators, the innkeeper and the Samaritan break through the bounds of time, space, and culture to access the reality of God's future, when everyone will act with this kind of radical trust in each other and radical care for people they don't even know.

Perhaps without knowing it, the anonymous Samaritan and the anonymous innkeeper act like followers of Jesus. Quietly, gently, they invite us to join them in such acts of trusting and trustworthy collaboration.

Notes

¹ "From Jerusalem to Jericho," <http://bibleresources.americanbible.org/node/1491>.

² Bruce W. Longenecker, "The Story of the Samaritan and the Innkeeper (Luke 10:30-35): A Study in Character Rehabilitation," *Biblical Interpretation* 17 (2009), 430-432.

³ In addition to Longenecker's article, I've used chapter 22 of Kenneth E. Bailey's *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (IVP Academic, 2008) as background sources for this sermon.