

## **"The Good Samaritan as Economic Justice"**

Luke 10:25-37

A Sermon by Rodney Wallace Kennedy

We are Good Samaritans. This church does so much good in this city and we are Good Samaritans. But this gospel story is more than a pat on the back for good people. Before we look at the Gospel Lesson of Luke 10:25-37, a few words of clarification. If you hear this sermon as a Democrat or a Republican, you have not heard the word. I believe that the major political parties, as presently constituted, are morally bankrupt. Their proposed solutions have failed and will continue to fail. President Obama is no messiah and Sarah Palin is no saint. Politics is a game and the two parties change positions in order to get elected, not because they care about the people. In 1948 Republicans introduced legislation providing affordable housing for all people. The bill was sponsored by "Mr Conservative," Ohio's own, Senator Robert Taft. Democrats throw money and hope some of it helps; but we need more, far more, than money. This is an attempt to have a biblical and theological conversation and the problem we are going to have is that many folks are no longer to have a theological conversation without hearing it through secular, political ears. As you listen to this sermon, anything you attribute to politics will be a misreading. It is the biblical message that is being presented here.

The Good Samaritan story: We can run but we cannot hide. Google Good Samaritan and count the hospitals named Good Samaritan, the nursing homes, the hospices. Then there are those ubiquitous beggars, jogging our biblical memories, at our exit ramps advertising for work, for baby formula, or "I refuse to lie: I want money for beer." As we crossed the Stewart Street Bridge yesterday afternoon, heading home after visiting Don Williams at Good Samaritan Hospital, I spotted a beggar at the corner of the boulevard. My reaction? Well, I was relieved that he was on the other side of the street from me, but I felt guilty. Aren't we postmodern people who have outgrown guilt? Haven't our therapists told us it's not our fault; we are not responsible? But, if honest, we still have this nagging sense of guilt. Well, perhaps the time has come to ask the Lord if this guilt is our wake-up call. What if there is forgiveness and Christian action on the other side of our guilt?

At first glance, you would think the story of the Good Samaritan would lead us all to alleviate every instance of innocent suffering. Not so fast. The

story has been, like one of its main characters, left for dead in the graveyard of irrelevance. So I ask, “Can this story live again?” Let us pray that the Holy Spirit will breathe new life into this story; restore its conscience-rattling ability. In the spirit of Ezekiel in the valley of dry bones, this is my prayer: “Come from the four winds O breath of life, and breathe upon these bones, that they may live, stand on their feet, and do your will.”

Some Christians reduce the Good Samaritan to a story about an individual doing good deeds. On this reading we all get gold stars. Trophies for everyone. Others read it as a spiritual Sunday School lesson for children that has nothing to do with real life. More often we see it as a story about an impossible ideal that we can't reach and thus have no responsibility for trying. It is just an act of charity. After all, we are a charitable people. But then the dead bones begin to rattle: The prophet Amos did not say, “Let charity roll down like mighty waters” but “Let justice roll down like mighty waters.” Charity passes out lunches at the door; justice eradicates hunger. The church is far more than a charitable organization. When we put the meat on the bones, when we hear the story as a social, political, and economic mandate for grown-ups the story lives again.

The Good Samaritan is a story about ethical economics. The root word of economics is *oikonomia* – Greek for household management, for putting your house in order. Well, the religious house of the priest and the Levite was bankrupt. A pitiful priest and little Levite, scurrying down the road to Jericho like a pair of rats, were the leftovers of a religion that once prided itself on caring for the stranger. A pair of shriveled, stingy, pathetic figureheads. See a great religion reduced to a complete lack of compassion; justice choked down to trickle-down; righteousness reduced to self-righteousness; worship dumbed down to fellowship dinners and noisy songs (Amos 5:21-24).

So what happens? Religion passes by on the other side. Hear the priest and Levite mumble, “What if it's an ambush?” “He didn't look like he had a green card.” “It's none of my business.” Watch them destroy the integrity of religion by what they didn't do. The priest and the Levite were consummate examples of people who worshiped God, but faced with human need **PASSED BY ON THE OTHER SIDE**; who knew their Scripture, but faced with human suffering, **PASSED BY ON THE OTHER**

SIDE; who said their prayers, but when faced with human helplessness, PASSED BY ON THE OTHER SIDE.

The prophet Amos cries, “Get your economic house in order.” Amos believed that the empire of Israel was going to fall because of their unjust treatment of neighbors – the poor. “Hear this word,” he cries, “you who crush the poor, who oppress the needy, your empire is falling!” “For four transgressions of Israel, I will not,” God says, “revoke the punishment; because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of shoes – they that trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and turn aside the way of the afflicted.” The measure of an empire’s greatness is not its military power, but how it treats its poor.

The Good Samaritan is a story about the economy of God. God’s economy appears frequently in the stories of Jesus. In one story, the boss passes out the same pay for one hour’s work as for twelve. “Crazy unfairness,” we shout. In another story a dishonest steward realizes that friends are more important than money. “Show me the money,” we repeat. In another story, a rich farmer, assuming the right of private property, boasts that he will build bigger barns and eat, drink, and be merry. Then God says, “Fool! This night your soul is required of you; and whose land will this be?” Private ownership of land is an illusion in the Gospels. The government doesn’t own the land; that’s socialism. Individuals don’t own the land; that’s capitalism. God owns the land. The earth and all that is in it is the Lord’s. Jesus called this JUBILEE – the 50<sup>th</sup> year when all land was returned and all debts were canceled. This is God’s economy and it is not the way we do business. In today’s story, the Good Samaritan pays for the Emergency Room as well as the long-term care of the left for dead man. “When I come back I will repay you what more you spend.” There’s such a flow of generosity and abundance in God’s economy. Here we see that God has a bigger economy than the world’s.

In God’s economy, the best use of wealth is to set people free, and generosity is the best investment. And please note that the Good Samaritan, living in God’s economy, had enough wealth to cover the hospital bill. He successfully lives in both worlds.

The story of the Good Samaritan is a story of the economics of compassion. In God’s economy, the stock market rises the more generosity and compassion we show. Compassion is the money of God’s

economy. We need enough compassion to provide decent housing, medical care, education, food to every person in this world. Some of you remind me that medical care is not a right in the Constitution. So what? In the Bible it is a necessity for people of faith. And the Bible is more important than the Constitution of the United States.

The more fully human we are, the more compassion we have. Jesus is all the compassion in the world. "He was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor." Jesus gave his life for every person that ever lived and he is our example. This is a basic theological and biblical principle. This is how we are to so live – with complete compassion. This is not politics as usual. Thus Jesus is the most fully alive human being to ever live. Sister Joan Chittister, Benedictine nun, social psychologist, and a Ph.D. in speech communication (what's not to love?) says: "Evolutionary scientists tell us that the brain is hard-wired for compassion." The Good Samaritan turns out to be a glorious human being fully alive and fully participating in the economy of God. As St. Irenaeus, bishop of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century said, "The glory of God is a human being full alive."

So what's the answer? A whole new economy! Here we embrace our enlarged neighbor responsibilities. A kingdom of God with a salvation that feeds every hungry neighbor, clothes every naked neighbor, houses every houseless neighbor. In God's economy, one human being is more valuable than all the gold in Fort Knox. The absolute sacred value of every human being is once again a biblical value, a part of God's economy.

It will cost us hard-earned cash to help this many people. We will have to reduce our empire. Read Amos 7:7-17 and listen to the prophetic voice that condemns empire for not caring for the poor. Will we be branded unpatriotic if we insist on an end to the empire and a bringing home of our troops from more than 170 military bases around the world? Sure. Empires have an insatiable appetite. Very defensive about defense systems. Very insecure about security. And our empire has become the little shop of horrors! "Feed me Seymour! Feed me all night long. 'Cause if you feed me, Seymour, I can grow up big and strong."

Let me give a theological grounding for this reading. William McClendon, in *Ethics*, says, "THE CHURCH NOW IS THE PRIMITIVE CHURCH; the commands of Jesus are addressed directly to us." What Jesus said then we are to do now. And the primitive church set about those

tasks. According to Jesus, the nations on judgment day will be judged by how well we fed the hungry and cared for the hurt. Please don't miss the biblical and theological point: Jesus says that the NATIONS will be judged by how well they fed the hungry (See Matthew 25). The church is polytemporal – living all at once in the past, present, and future. So the Good Samaritan is not a cute story but a way of life for all of the followers of Jesus. We are the Good Samaritan. Our impossible task is to help every person out of the ditch.

Some of you have so imbibed the American value of individualism and have such a dis-ease with poor people, that you will be stewing about this idea that eternal life is dependent on how well we care for the poor and the hungry. Again the biblical lesson is clear: “Do this and live,” Jesus says to the lawyer. We are now faced with shocking readings that the way to salvation is not simple belief, but a series of “Good Samaritan” practices rooted in the generosity and grace of God. Jesus tells the lawyer that eternal life is dependent on how we treat our neighbors: “Do this and live.” I can hear your protests: “Surely, we are God's special chosen people. Aren't we saved? Don't we believe in Jesus?” But Jesus is having nothing to do with worship that doesn't issue in witness and witness that doesn't issue in compassionate service of the poor. At the very least we will advocate for the poor and seek justice for them.

Jesus, our Jesus, our-what-a-friend-we-have-in-Jesus, Jesus, is the social and economic savior of the world. And still his voice rings across the years, “From anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.” Dare we ask that the Holy Spirit fill this church with the gifts of compassion and generosity?