

Deuteronomy 30:9-14  
Psalm 25: 1-9  
Colossians 1:1-14  
Luke 10:25-37

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St. Peter's Glenside  
July 10<sup>th</sup>, 2022  
Year C

## One Hell of a Sheep

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable to thee, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. AMEN

It's never easy to confess, especially something shameful, and I'm ashamed that I once mocked Fred Rogers although I kept it to myself. I didn't tweet or post on Facebook, or Snap Chat or Instagram—although none of that existed when my daughter was small. Nor did I feel guilty that she loved him because it meant that when her little chair was in front of the TV, I had a half hour to myself.

But when Fred came through the door, exchanging his jacket for that zippered cardigan – his mother knit him a new one every year-- then putting on his navy blue sneakers and singing “It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood....I thought nothing could be more corny if not dumb.

God was I wrong. I am genuinely ashamed that I missed the point for not only decades—but by miles.

When my brother Mark was here last week for the Fourth of July, the Fred Rogers documentary was what he wanted to watch on Netflix.

Although I'd seen it before, the purity, kindness, and deep spirituality of Fred Rogers brings me nearly to tears every time. It wasn't until Rogers died in 2003 that I realized he was an ordained Presbyterian minister, but chose a career in TV because after being disgusted by a violent TV show he began thinking about television's power to be used for good—especially for children.

Fred was an only child. He was sick and bedridden a lot and bullied at school for being fat. His childhood was privileged but his parents banned any discussion of feelings in the family.

Talking to children about their feelings, taking them seriously, and creating a sense of love and belonging made Mr. Roger's neighborhood a beautiful place to be. "I've always wanted a neighbor just like you.....Could you be mine? Would you be my neighbor?" All were invited.

Who is my neighbor? It's the question the lawyer is asking Jesus in the parable of the Good Samaritan, a parable we all know so well it begs the question, "What more is there to say?"

The notion of the Good Samaritan is embedded in our culture. Hospitals, charities, and laws are called "Good Samaritan" and in the Chestnut Hill Local this week a headline reads, "Good Samaritan Barber Makes National News." -- a heartwarming story about a local man whose mobile barbershop has been giving free haircuts to the homeless for five years.

So as far as parables go, this one feels tame and domesticated—a feel good story of generous compassion. Most of us, myself included, have never thought of it as particularly provocative. But it is because in the first century Samaritans were the hated other.

First century Jews didn't need Jesus to tell them to love and care for the stranger. That was already well-established in the Torah. Saving a life was – and is—a value in Judaism above all others.

So why didn't the priest and Levite stop? Commentators suggest that the priest might have felt he risked being "defiled" by the purity codes if he got close to the victim and he turned out to be dead. The road to Jericho was winding, steep, and dangerous—making travelers and easy prey for bandits.

The late Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in preaching on this parable suggested the priest and Levite might have been afraid, asking themselves, "If I stop and help this man, what will happen to me?"

King points out that the Samaritan acted with a dangerous unselfishness when he reversed the question: "If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?"

King preached on this parable in his “I’ve been to the Mountaintop” speech in on April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1968, in Memphis, where African American sanitation workers were on strike. King identified with the Samaritan’s question and said that night in Memphis:

“If I do not stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to them?” That’s the question. Let us rise up tonight with a greater readiness... And let us move on in these powerful days, these days of challenge to make America what it out to be.”

Less than 24 hours later, King was shot dead on a balcony at the Lorraine Motel.

In her remarkable book about the parables, *Short Stories by Jesus*, New Testament and Jewish Studies scholar, Amy-Jill Levine explains what makes the parable of the Good Samaritan provocative. She writes that in the traditional telling of parables, the third person who’d have arrived on the scene would have been a good guy—like an Israelite-- not a Samaritan. Levine writes that Jesus upended everything when he reversed expectations and made the hero a Samaritan—a hated “other:”

In modern terms, this would be like going from Larry and Moe to Osama Bin Laden...Jewish listeners might balk at the idea of receiving Samaritan aid. They might have thought, “I’d rather die than acknowledge that one from that group saved me”... or “I do not want to recognize that a murderer will be the one to rescue me.”<sup>1</sup>

And remember, the lawyer asked Jesus what he had to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus asked him to state the law and he aced the test by quoting the Torah: “You will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul...and you will love your neighbor as yourself.”

But the lawyer’s follow-up question was: “And who is my neighbor?”

Perhaps he was looking for a dodge because the question can also mean: “Who *isn’t* my neighbor?”

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<sup>1</sup> Levine, Amy-Jill, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*, Harper One, 2014, p.103, 104

Jesus answers him with the parable. And when the lawyer again asks that question and replies that the Samaritan – the one who did mercy—was indeed the neighbor, everything shifts and the parable has something radical to teach:

We are required to *do* love, with no exceptions. Not to think, but to act, and realize that even in our enemies, there is always the potential for good which often blinds us. Writes Amy-Jill Levine:

Will we be able to care for our enemies, who are also our neighbors? Will we be able to bind up their wounds rather than blow up their cities? And can we imagine that they might do the same for us? Can we ...practice not leaving the wounded traveler on the road?<sup>2</sup>

We can if we put ourselves in the ditch which is not where most of us would locate ourselves in this parable.

But sooner or later all of us will have what Debie Thomas, in *Journey with Jesus*, describes as our “encounter on that dark road.”

Somehow, someday, somewhere, it will (happen). In a hospital room? At a graveside? After a marriage fails? When a cherished job goes bust? After the storm, the betrayal, the war...When you're lying bloody in a ditch, what matters is not whose help you'd prefer, whose way of practicing Christianity you like best, whose politics you agree with. What matters is whether or not anyone will stop to show you mercy before you die.<sup>3</sup>

As Fred Rogers was dying, his last words to his wife were, “Am I a sheep?” A reference to when Jesus separated the sheep from the goats—and the sheep who would be with Jesus in heaven—and the test of their virtue, Jesus explained, was those whose actions served the least of these because “whatever you do to the least of these, you do to me.”

So yes, Fred, a good shepherd to generations of children, who taught the rest of us that the only beautiful neighborhood is one where we all belong and when all is

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p.115

<sup>3</sup> Thomas, Debie, *Journey with Jesus*, July 3, 2016

said and done you “did love” for 895 episodes of your show and hands down,  
were one hell of a sheep. AMEN