

## **In-Group, Out-Group**

Proper 10, Year C, RCL. Luke 10:25-37 (the parable of the good Samaritan). July 10, 2016. The Episcopal Shared Ministry of Our Saviour, Salem and Trinity, Alliance. The Rev'd Jerome H. (Kip) Colegrove.

The story of the Good Samaritan is one of the most familiar in the Bible, and it ought to be. It addresses one of the fundamental issues of human life, the tendency of people to form groups that exclude one another. You've heard me call this the "in-group, out-group" dynamic. It can be played on any level from playground politics to national politics. Our current political situation has thrown this tendency into high relief, but we have all experienced it from childhood on.

Once the exclusion of a group occurs, suspicion, fear and anger often accompany any interaction or even mention of the excluded group. A really good example is the situation between the Jews and the Samaritans in Jesus' time. (There are still Samaritans around in about the same place they lived in antiquity, but not nearly as many of them and they are not treated with as much hostility as in Jesus' time.)

Here's some background. Long before Jesus' time, the tribes of Israel were united as one kingdom under King David. There were already regional variations in religious practice throughout that territory. It wasn't long before the kingdom split in two, into the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom. These developed different religious

and political histories for a while. In time, stronger nations—the Assyrians and the Babylonians—conquered them, first the Northern Kingdom, whose capital was Samaria, and then the Southern Kingdom, whose capital was Jerusalem.

All this took hundreds of years. By Jesus' time there was a relatively small population whose practice of the old Hebrew or Israelite religion was descended from the Northern Kingdom; these were called Samaritans, after the old Northern Kingdom's capital. The Jews, properly so called, were a much larger population based in the old Southern Kingdom, also called Judea after the old tribal territory of Judah. Their central place of worship was Jerusalem; the Samaritans' central place of worship was Mount Gerizim (as it still is). They were about as different as, oh, Episcopalians and Presbyterians. But they thought each other were unclean because each group thought the other group followed corrupt religious practices.

The thing to be emphasized here is that neither group had anything much to do with the other. The Samaritan territory was on the main north-south road to Jerusalem, but Jews going to and from Jerusalem would take a long and inconvenient detour around that area—to avoid those unclean Samaritans! And as we read in Luke 9:53, Jesus and his entourage were suspect in Samaritan territory once the Samaritans noticed that he “had his face set toward Jerusalem”—that is, once the Samaritans discovered that Jesus and those who followed him supported, and

considered themselves part of, the Jewish version of the Hebrew religious tradition.

The “Samaritan versus Jew” dynamic has powerful traction in Jesus’ witness to the good new thing God is doing. In the story of the Samaritan woman at the well in the fourth chapter of John’s gospel, Jesus crosses two strong cultural barriers of his day: the barrier between a man and a woman of suspicious background bantering in public, and the barrier between Samaritans and Jews having anything to do with one another. Jesus did not avoid Samaritan territory; his good news was good news for everybody. Jesus did not avoid women; his good news was good news for both sexes.

This barrier-crossing by Jesus, between groups on the outs with one another, began something that the Christian tradition has cherished, though not always with great effectiveness, ever since his time. This is the primacy of generosity and compassion between, not just individuals, but groups of people. And the only way it gets started is if somebody crosses the barrier. Once a group gets labeled by another group as dangerous, icky or wrong, that becomes a categorization that can get handed down through generations. Only living up close to people of the out-group, working with them, fellowshiping with them, swapping stories with them, marrying each other’s kids, appreciating each other’s music and festivals...only doing all this, in depth and over time, fixes the problem completely; just saying that things like racism and sexism and religious prejudice are nasty or illegal won’t work by

itself. You've got to keep rubbing shoulders. In the Balkans—Yugoslavia, in particular—Christians and Muslims were gradually learning to live with each other until the conflict there in the 1990s reawakened all the old ethnic and religious in-group, out-group stuff. In Northern Ireland the religious wars of the 17<sup>th</sup> century have slowly been dying out, with a history in the very recent past of deadly acrimony. The only thing that works to lay this sort of thing to rest is close, personal, steady, intentional contact. And someone—often more than one someone—has to take the lead. Often these leaders are people of faith.

Jesus took the lead by actually going to the Samaritan's territory, speaking with them, spending time with them, and accustoming his entourage to doing this according to his example. He also took the lead by making a Samaritan the hero of the parable we call the Good Samaritan—an especially meaningful title because the story was designed by Jesus to be told to a Jewish audience, for whom no Samaritan heretic would normally be seen as "good." Jesus turns the typical Jewish in-group, out-group point of view around: it is the high-status Jewish priest and Levite who fall morally short in the story, so that an ordinary Samaritan outranks the cream of the Jewish religion in this instance. The message is: it's easy to find excuses to stand off, to avoid "those people." Showing care and compassion was more important than preserving ritual purity, in both Samaritan and Jewish ethics; the Samaritan knew what to do and did it, and the priest and the Levite should have known better than to pass by on the far side of the road. It is better to get within touching distance than to keep

yourself too safe. To have a pure heart can (and so often does) mean getting your hands in the risky mud and blood of life.

In our country, as everywhere else, the only thing that works to make compassion real is close, personal, steady, intentional contact. That's where compassion can come to fruition. Religion, race and gender are hot-button in-group, out-group issues for us. Jesus' parable is meant to teach that compassion trumps our cultural categories of status, social acceptability, and contamination anxiety (that is, anxiety over being tainted by association with, or support of, the dangerous out-group). True compassion, that crosses the barrier and hangs in there till one has done all one can, puts our prejudices on the table for modification through increasing our fellow-feeling with those we thought were dangerously and unpleasantly different.

Our faith has taught for centuries that only by choosing to get involved do we show love for one another. Only by deciding that compassion is more important than self-protection do we discover the power of the Gospel to heal the in-group, out-group dynamic. Only by deciding that we really are neighbors—not going about our business on opposite sides of a wall, but interacting routinely and in caring ways—do we find grace to heal the fearful and dismissive patterns of thinking and feeling and behaving that poison so much of human life.

What barrier will the story of the Good Samaritan help you and me to cross?

