

## Highfield Rd uniting Church

### Who deserves my love? Luke 10:25 - 37



Jesus was a master storyteller; even those who don't know the story of Jesus possibly know some of Jesus' stories. Today's tale of the man who went down from Jerusalem to Jericho is probably the best known; the phrase 'Good Samaritan' is now a part of our common culture, although the son who takes the money and runs is also well known. However, being well known and being understood are different

things. And that applies in the church as well. Is the story of the Samaritan too well known? Have we, over the years, wrung every bit of meaning from this story? I've preached from it eight or nine times over the years. Does the familiarity of the story, with its simple message of kindness, mean that it has lost the power to move us? There are at least three powerful messages in this story that are lost to us because we are in such a different culture. Jesus didn't just turn the question around to get the lawyer to look beyond law, he crafted a story that forced his hearers to look beyond religion and beyond race.

*A man was driving the Birdsville Track when he hit an emu and destroyed his car and was badly injured. The patrol padre was heading down the road, and not wanting to miss a church camp in the Flinders Ranges, drove on by. Likewise, a verger from Birdsville was heading to Port Augusta, and finding it all too distressing, drove on by. A local Aboriginal man saw the damaged car and stopped, helped the driver into his car, bound his wounds and took him to the nearest station where he could rest and get help from the Flying Doctor.*

Reframing the story into our culture and time goes some way to reclaiming the power of the story to affect us. The dominant power of Jesus story is not just that someone showed kindness, but that the most unlikely person showed kindness. The person who, in Jewish cultural terms, knew nothing of God or the right way for religion, was the one who showed kindness. The man who was injured could possibly have preferred to die rather than have a Samaritan show him kindness. In honour of NAIDOC week, I have included an Aboriginal in the story; please feel free to substitute your most unlikely rescuer. The second power of Jesus story is that the people who should have known the Law and the requirement for love, did nothing. Worse than nothing, the story says that they turned away after seeing the injured man. We are left to infer the excuses running through their minds, but they did have excuses - religious duty, ritual impurity from touching blood or a dead body, fear of being attacked themselves, the man deserved his suffering for travelling alone etc. Maybe I have robbed the story of some power by offering excuses for the padre and the verger. Excuses in the face of the law of love. The third power of Jesus story is bringing into focus the whole of the law of love of neighbour. The lawyer asked, "Who is my neighbour?" seemingly to ignore the second part, "Who is my neighbour *who I should love as I love myself?*" What would he have wanted to happen if he had been walking down the road and been robbed?

The story of the Samaritan tending to the needs of the injured man on the road is not just about kindness. It both reframes what the Law is talking about when it says, "Love your neighbour as yourself", and reframes what the prophets were talking about when they proclaimed God's word, 'I desire mercy not sacrifice'. And, most importantly, this story tells us that you cannot put rules, or guidelines, or barriers around the call to love. The lawyer's question was clearly not aimed at opening his love to the widest range of people, but rather narrowing it down to a discreet set of 'neighbours'. I'm a bit surprised that Jesus didn't cast the second person in his story as a lawyer, because the question that prompted the story implied that the lawyer wanted to know who he could legitimately walk past. The question, "Who is my neighbour", is seeking to know the limits of love, rather than imagining the extent of God's love.

Last year, I put up a sign in the garden, "If you can be anything in this life, be kind." And that is clearly a lesson from the story of the Samaritan rescuer, but it isn't the whole lesson, nor the most important lesson for us as followers of Jesus. To love God, with all our heart, and all our soul, and all our mind, and all our strength is our prime duty, but that shouldn't leave us as purely religious people, focussed only on worship and spiritual matters. To love our neighbour as ourselves means acting in love in the world, towards any who are in need. Love as a verb and not just a nice feeling. As James put it in his letter - "If someone is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill", and yet does not supply their bodily needs, what good is that?"

Religious duty should not stop love. Worship should not take priority over love. Cultural norms should not take priority over love. Kindness and mercy and compassion are the ways of love, action not just emotion.

This passage from Luke's Gospel is headed in most Bibles as 'The parable of the Good Samaritan'. However, I don't think parable is the right title. It isn't a story from common life that teaches us about the kingdom of God. Some medieval commentators tried to turn it into an analogy of the kingdom - the wounded man is Christ, the inn is the church, the two coins are the sacraments - but that is not necessary. This is a story in answer to a question about how to live, here and now. Like all good stories, it has deeper meanings and other lessons, but it is all about life, here and now, not the kingdom to come. Some might argue that makes it the most important parable because it's talking about the inbreaking of the kingdom - God's will - here and now, rather than waiting around for some heaven to come. Either way, this is *the* story of discipleship, when we are on the road, following Jesus, always look out for those who are in need. Those in need are not a distraction from the path, they are the path. Walk in kindness, compassion, and mercy, for that is the way of love. Amen