“The Good Samaritan,” by Rev. Dr. Mark Caggiano, 10/18/26



Exodus 33:12-23; Luke 10:25-37

[A] Samaritan while traveling came upon him, and when he saw him he was moved with compassion.

This story of the Good Samaritan is one of the central teaching stories of Jesus. We saw the two men, a priest and a Levite, walk by a man in trouble. And then the Samaritan comes along and

helps the man. This story is significant in several respects. First and foremost is Jesus redefining what it means to be a neighbor. We heard:

Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

The idea of loving one's neighbor predates the time of Jesus. It is in the book of Leviticus, and it carries over in word and spirit through many other passages. But originally, it meant one's actual neighbor, meaning those nearby, those who were generally also worshippers of the God of Israel. That limited understanding of the word "neighbor" still comes up in modern conversations, but Jesus was crucially responsible for expanding it to include anyone we come across in this life.

We know this because of the characters in the story. The priest walked by the man without helping. By definition, he should have helped his neighbor. The unspoken reason for his walking by was that a priest might defile himself by touching a man who looked half dead and therefore might have been fully dead – priests could not touch a dead body and then serve in the Temple without an extended period of ritual purification.

The same was true for the Levite, which we might understand as a subgroup of clergy – call him a deacon. If he touched a dead body, he would be considered unclean. And ritual purity overshadowed helping someone in need. Jesus told the story in this fashion to criticize such zealous purity over basic human decency.

The kicker to the story was the person who helped: a Samaritan. English speakers in the 21st century hear the word "Samaritan" and we imagine a selflessly kind person. And that is because of this story. But to someone who was listening to Jesus 2,000 years ago, the word "Samaritan" had another meaning. Samaritans were reviled as heretics.

Samaritans were from the northern area of Israel that had broken away centuries before as a new kingdom. They set up an alternate religious system, so they were not dependent upon the Temple in Jerusalem. And that created a lot of bad blood, like the religious wars in Europe between Catholics and Protestants. So, when Jesus casts a Samaritan as the hero of this story, he was doing so to overturn both the sense of prejudice against Samaritans and to expand the notion of neighbor to include everyone.

The average person reading the Bible does not know this. They might know that a priest should have helped but not understood why he did not. They would have less of an idea about the meaning of a Levite unless they were well-read in both the Bible and other historical materials. And "Samaritan" has transformed into a term for a good-natured person, rather than a despised name for a person, a person somehow acting out of character.

Sometimes the words of the Bible are not clear. We assume they mean something because of modern usage, but if we look back they might imply something else entirely.

This is like in our prayer book when we ask God to help people in a way most *expedient* for them. Expedient now means doing it quickly, doing it efficiently. But that prayer was published in 1662 in the old, old Book of Common Prayer. And then it meant fitting, proper, or suitable. Quite a different connotation. Words change over time and it is helpful for us to take a moment to dig below the surface to find intended meanings for old terms.

Our painting today is a depiction of the Good Samaritan. The distinctive style and vibrant color palette signal its creator, Vincent Van Gogh. Van Gogh worked on this painting after he had voluntarily entered a sanitorium in Provence, after bouts of severe mental illness and his famous difficulty with his ear. While in the hospital, he was not idle, producing over 150 paintings and 100 drawings. This included his famous *Starry Night* and our painting this morning, the *Good Samaritan*.

Van Gogh is not remembered for his religious artwork, though he also painted in this time period his version of the Pieta, when Mary is holding Jesus after the crucifixion. Jesus in that painting has red hair, which has led some to imagine Van Gogh interpreting his struggles with mental health through the image of Christ's suffering.

In the *Good Samaritan*, the man being rescued does not have red hair, but it is likely that Van Gogh was imagining himself in the role of the one beaten and left for dead. And the Good Samaritan, the one who arrives to save him, that is thought to have been his brother, Theo, who many times helped his talented but deeply troubled brother.

Van Gogh once wrote: *[I]'m always inclined to believe that the best way of knowing God is to love a great deal. Love that friend, that person, that thing, whatever you like, you'll be on the right path to knowing more thoroughly, afterwards; that's what I say to myself. But you must love with a high, serious intimate sympathy, with a will, with intelligence, and you must always seek to know more thoroughly, better, and more. That leads to God, that leads to unshakeable faith.*

Van Gogh was a faithful man in his way, having grown up in the Dutch Reformed tradition. His life was perhaps less traditional than that serious and straightlaced faith might suggest, but what a man holds in his heart can be quite different from the labels we might ascribe to him. Like the old meaning of Samaritan versus the new, our ideas about something might be wildly different from the meanings of the past or even the current meanings differing people have for certain words or ideas.

For example, some of you might recognize this piece of clothing.



For those reading at home, it is a black and white scarf with a distinctive crisscross pattern. It is a few feet across in a square, this one with white tassels on the fringe. It is called a kufiyah, assuming you are from Palestine, the area this scarf is from. And some people when seeing this scarf might become upset, even angry. Why? Because this scarf has become associated with the troubles in the Middle East and specifically Palestinian opposition to the Nation of Israel.

I recall first seeing this scarf worn by Yassir Arafat, the former leader of the Palestinian Liberation Organization and later the president of the Palestinian Authority. He wore this scarf as a head covering and that association with him and the PLO has created a symbol. For those supportive of the PLO and opposed to Israel, it was and is a symbol of solidarity. And for those opposed to the PLO and supportive of Israel, the scarf is a symbol to be feared or hated.

Why do I have this scarf, you might ask? I picked it up in the "lost and found" of a bar. I worked there years ago and one night I saw it there. I waited a respectable amount of time, in my estimation at least, to see if anyone reclaimed it and then I took it home. Why? Because I needed a scarf. I was a teenager and had little understanding of the meaning of such things. And I had seen similar scarves on the streets of Cambridge.

Now someone older and wiser might have surmised both the meaning of this scarf and its presence on the streets of Cambridge, but I was not one of them. So, this scarf has sat in my closet for decades.

About twelve years ago, I traveled to the Middle East on a sabbatical. I went to Jerusalem and Bethlehem, I went to Nazareth and Galilee, places familiar from the Bible. And I went to Ramallah and Hebron, places you hear about in news reports with concerned voices about troubling events. I travelled there and toured religious sites and spoke to both Israelis and Palestinians about the state of the region.

At the tail end of the trip, we traveled to Jordan. There, we went to the ruins of Petra. We rode jeeps through the desert and smoked a hookah under the stars (recommend the former, not the later). And, I rode a camel in the desert and rather ingloriously fell off the camel into a sand dune. My body was unhurt, my dignity gravely wounded. Honestly, Jordan was glorious.

At the end of the camel ride, we met with local traders who were selling touristy items, like bags of tea and incense, little tchotchkes and souvenirs. They also had kufiyahs. And I bought another one. I have it here. It is very similar except for the color, this one being red and white.

I asked the men selling these items what the difference was. These were Jordanian Bedouins, the native folks who live out in the desert areas. And they said the difference was simple. If you lived out in the desert, you would wear a red one. And if you lived in the city, you would wear a black one. That's the difference.

What were they for? The scarf is used to cover your head from the sun and your face from sandstorms, because sun and sand are common concerns and this scarf helps with both. And that was it. For the people of Jordan, or at least *these* people in Jordan, there was no political meaning to the scarf. It was simply a useful piece of traditional clothing.

I must confess that I have not worn the black scarf since the 1980s and I have never worn the red one. I realized in time that these scarves have a meaning to people. That meaning would identify me as a participant in an argument about what should and should not be happening in the Middle East. And I do not wish to join that argument by way of clothing. Not because I do not have opinions, but because this symbol might close off a conversation before it even started.

A few weeks ago, someone asked me about their own entry in such difficult conversations. They were speaking by email with a colleague, and they were heatedly going back and forth about the situation in Israel and Gaza and the wider Middle East. And this online exchange of ideas was getting caught up on certain words.

Certain words that one person was using one way, and another person was using in another. This problem with words reminded me about the problems with the word "Samaritan," what the word used to mean and what it now means. Two people saying the same thing and meaning something entirely different.

There are two words that these days seem to have divergent meanings. They are “anti-Semitism” and “anti-Zionism.” What is an anti-Semite? And what is an anti-Zionist?

In my experience, an anti-Semite is a person who hates or is prejudiced against Jews. Against the Jewish religion, traditions, customs. Sometimes it takes on a racialized perspective, with Jewishness as a racial rather than religious designation. This was the form of anti-Semitism espoused in Nazi Germany. And, until recently, I thought I had a handle on its meaning in light of that historical usage.

Three years ago, this word became more complicated. On October 7, 2023, there was a systemic attack on Israel by the Palestinian group Hamas. That attack led to over 1,200 people killed and over 3,000 wounded. Two hundred fifty-one (251) hostages were taken. This was a horrific, unwarranted attack on civilians as well as military personnel.

Israel had been caught unaware but the response to October 7th has been widespread and overwhelming. According to Palestinian health authorities, 74,000 Palestinians have been killed in the military response to the October 7th attack. The Israeli government disputes that figure as unreliable and biased, notwithstanding that in January this year Israeli military officials publicly stated that about 70,000 Palestinians had been killed.

This is a lot of historical prologue for a sermon about words, I realize, but that is exactly what is required before discussing this topic. You have to state the number of people killed on October 7th followed immediately by an explanation about the unwarranted and callous nature of those deaths. Once you have clearly described that circumstance, you are then allowed to discuss what happened in Gaza, touching base along the way about those tragic losses.

There is a pattern to these conversations in which effort must be exercised at the right times and in the right ways. Say this first, then you can say that. Do not spend too long doing it, however, and be prepared to endure criticism of varying degrees about how unfair you are being.

I remember attending a clergy meeting in the weeks after the attack. My Jewish colleagues were obviously reeling from these events. Some of them had family in harm’s way and a few lost people in the attacks. And at that same table were some Muslim friends, people not from that region of the world but who had been sympathetic to the plight of Palestinian civilians, sympathetic like many of those same Jewish colleagues. It was an emotional moment in the near shadows of that tragedy and everyone offered condolences and horror over what had happened.

But as time passed and the war in Gaza escalated, that sense of condolence became complicated and that sense of horror expended in new directions. These colleagues had to stand in a room filled with people, some close friends, of different faiths and then return to their communities. And what could be said in one room could not then be said in another. Because words could mean one thing in one place and something else entirely in another.

Is it anti-Semitic to criticize the military response of the Israeli government? Is it anti-Semitic to criticize the leadership of Bejamin Netanyahu, the prime minister of Israel? A prime minister who is under indictment for political corruption in his own country and the subject of an international arrest warrant for war crimes. Is the international accusation of war crimes anti-Semitic? And are those charges *in Israel* anti-Semitic or merely a political witch hunt?

I made a comment at that October clergy meeting. I said that I did not know what to say. I did not know how I as an American and as a Christian minister could or should respond. And me being at a loss for words is a rare moment.

It has never crossed my mind that Israel should not exist. But my experiences in the Middle East also pull at my sympathies for the Palestinian people. I have a deep sense of friendship for my Jewish colleagues and feelings of delight and admiration for their work and their communities. But I also have friendships with Muslims, from my personal life and my work in ministry. And I have studied both Jewish and Muslim scripture and tradition and I have come away with great respect for both.

At that meeting in October 2023, I said I did not know how to respond. I did not know how I could take a side, as deaths piled up in a war that has only become ever more unspeakably violent over the past three years.

It does not seem acceptable to say that Hamas and the Israeli government have *both* done horrible things. It seems like that would be making them equivalent, as equally valid or equally terrible.

And some of that hesitation is because of words and how they are being presented. Words like anti-Semitism that can mean prejudice against Jews but also used to discourage any criticism of the war in Gaza. Words like anti-Zionism that can suggest an existential threat against Israel but can also include a rejection of any suggestion that Palestinians have suffered after October 7th.

Because of this war over words, this struggle over definitions, I have generally stayed silent about something horrible happening in our world. Because I cherish my Jewish and Muslim friends and colleagues, I have been unable to talk about something critically important to them and profoundly important to our world.

And yet things have changed. The United States and some other governments have closely supported Israel. Others have been more negative, calling for sanctions, calling for isolation, calling for criminal indictments. And still others, like me, have been silent because, pardon the expression, you are damned if you do and you are damned if you don't.

I have not been saying a lot, but that does not mean I have not been paying attention. Sentiments about Israel seem to be shifting, particularly in the younger generations. Older folks remember the years of Cold War solidarity. Younger folks who grew up after the September 11th attacks in the United States have preloaded suspicions about the Middle East and the Persian Gulf.

But those even younger have seen wars go on for decades and the Israeli conflicts spread farther and wider year after year. And even those older audiences have grown tired of war, tired of our soldiers dying far from home. Tired of the cost in lives and in dollars.

And as they grow weary, young and old, they become less interested in offering their sympathies. Social media and new reports bounce back and forth with stories of one person siding with the Palestinians and others responding in support of Israel. People listen and maybe discuss what happened. But I am getting the sense that even this has become tiring and tiresome. And if you are not directly involved, you become less interested in carrying on difficult conversations.

In a way, disinterest is the same as dislike. Because if no one is ready to say something for or against what is happening, the circle of concern shrinks. The likelihood of future support

diminishes along with one's interest. If there is already growing negative sentiment around the world and increasing disinterest among Americans, what will that mean?

When this generation of college students grows up after years of being called anti-Semites for opposing the war in Gaza. When billions of dollars in US aid and trillions of dollars in US military expenditures are tallied up for wars in this region. When the vast majority of the world has already recognized Palestine as a nation. What will it mean?

It is anti-Semitic to hold prejudicial views against Jewish people and it is anti-Zionist to question the existence of the state of Israel. But what does it mean if people stop *caring*? What fancy word would we use to describe growing indifference?

Jesus changed the way we understand the word "neighbor." He sought to expand it into a universal sense of compassion for the people of the world. He changed the word as it was understood, when neighbor in the Bible just meant those nearby, those like me.

But what happens if Israel stops being our neighbor?

What happens if the people of Israel need our help and yet we are no longer interested in stopping to help?

I hope that never happens. But I also wish that none of this had ever happened.

I wish that people could summon up the courage to speak and to act so that the violence stops. And I wish remember that everyone is, or should be, our neighbor. Everyone.

Amen.