

The Good Samaritan – Luke 10: 25-37

Allow me to introduce myself: My name is Miriam, and I used to own a nice little inn. Not too fancy, but nice. A kind of bed and breakfast, you know? I was proud of it. My parents had owned it before me, and when it became mine, my husband and I remodelled it, made it a little more modern, and from it we earned a decent living. A clean place. A respectable place. It wasn't in a very good part of town, I have to tell you that. And so we tried especially hard to make it somewhere that decent people would stay. It was a beautiful little inn. It still brings tears to my eyes to think that we lost it. Yes, we lost the business – everything. But I'm getting ahead of my story – let me give you some background.

You may have guessed by now that I'm the innkeeper in the story Jesus told about – well – you call it the Good Samaritan. It's a funny thing about being a character in a story (you know, of course, that a parable is a story made up and told to make a point – Jesus used them all the time.) – being a character in a story is ok....You're limited, of course, by the bounds of the story and what the storyteller chooses to have you do...but there's a freedom in it too. I can be here, talking with you today because story characters never die. I've lived on all these years, centuries. And each time you tell the story of the Good Samaritan, I come to life again. And in between times, I watch and listen, as the world changes. It changes so much in lots of ways (What IS TWITTER anyway??) but then in other ways...not at all. You can still understand the story I'm in - why? Because your world isn't so very different from the time in which it was told. Religious people still pass by on the other side, and prejudice and intolerance still keep some people in the class of Samaritans, people to be shunned, not to be mixed with in good company.

I can see from here that there are people in your world who are treated that way – and are there religious people among you who pass by on the other side? I think there are. So...from my point of view, as a timeless story character, I might have some insights that could help you.

Stories, you know, have their own life. The world of stories has a life, a rhythm, a logic, all its own. They follow predictable patterns. For example, if a story begins "Once upon a time" then you can be pretty sure that it will end with "and they all lived....."

And if it begins "it was a dark and stormy night" you know what kind of story you're in for. In the same way, when you start to watch an episode of CSI or Law and Order, you know what's coming. Not the details, but you know generally what to expect and how the story is going to go. Right? They follow comfortable, predictable, patterns.

Well! Most stories do. And we characters in the story world get used to playing our parts. But this Jesus? – Jesus didn't follow the patterns at all. When HE started to tell a story, you never knew what was going to happen. All characters had to be on call, because you never knew which of us he'd use or how. Lots of stories, for example, use three characters. Have you ever heard jokes that begin, "there was a minister, and a rabbi and a priest" Right? You can tell who those characters are going to be. Or – what

about the old “there was a plane crash and at the pearly gates appear Jack Layton, Michael Ignatieff, and _____” – Stephen Harper, right? Has to be. That’s how the story goes.

Well, the story you call the Good Samaritan started out that way too. Someone needs help....three people come along: a priest, a Levite, and _____

Now maybe you’re not so familiar with these three, but trust me when I tell you it should have been a priest, a levite and a tax collector. Some sort of lay person. THAT would have made sense. In fact, when Jesus started to tell the story and called on the priest and the levite, we in the story world all turned and looked at the tax collector. He was already getting dressed. He thought he was on next. We all did! But no –

A priest and a levite – these are paid, professional religious people. You figure, ok he’s going to contrast them with a poor lay person. A penniless widow would have done just as well. It had all the earmarks of a story going in that direction, making the point that people who claim to be religious very often are the ones you can’t count on in the crunch. Jesus made that point often. And so I think we can all be forgiven for thinking that. He was going to take t his story in a different direction, though.

A priest.

A Levite

And a Samaritan.

A SAMARITAN???? A SAMARITAN? That’s like sayingapples, oranges and ...hymn books. It makes no sense. At all. What is a Samaritan doing in this story? (and don’t say I should have known because it’s called the Good Samaritan.....it wasn’t called that until later!)

Jesus’ stories have a way of doing that – he doesn’t follow the rules. His stories nearly always make you sit up and take notice and say “Excuse me????”

So – from a story telling point of view, I’d have to say that Jesus really knew how to do it. And following the rules was not one of his main concerns. All the good stuff happened when he broke them.

Well – back to the story.

The inn was mine. And as I said before, I was quite proud of it. Small, intimate, a place a person could feel safe. That wasn’t so easy in that neighbourhood, I can tell you. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho is long and winding – very dangerous, really. Thieves would hide behind rocks in the most isolated stretches, and wait for travellers on their way to the city. They’d attack them and rob and sometimes kill them. Why my parents chose to build an inn on that road I’ll never know- but business WAS good. Lots of pilgrims would travel it, going up to Jerusalem for the Holy Festivals. THOSE were the people we catered to. Good, fine, religious folk. And they needed clean, kosher places to stay on their journey, and that’s what I provided. I don’t think that you Christians understand that for religious people at that time, cleanliness wasn’t only a matter of hygiene, but of religious duty. And food rules were very strict. We

couldn't have just anyone working or staying there, because who knows what uncleanness they might bring in. And if someone had come all that way to go to Jerusalem to a festival and then wasn't able to attend because they had been contaminated at my inn? That would NOT be good.

So....we made the rule. We hired only law abiding Jews to work for us, and we accepted only decent and religious people as customers. But....others still kept coming and asking for a room ...so finally \I made a sign: "Jews only. No Samaritans allowed".

Why Samaritans? How can I begin to tell you? They were – they were our enemies. The history is a long one, but I can tell you that by the time this story was told, in the time of Jesus of Nazareth, the Jews cursed Samaritans in public and prayed in our Synagogues that they would have no share in eternal life. We would not accept the word of a Samaritan in court, nor accept any service from one. Grain that had passed through their land was considered defiled, and unclean for use in the synagogue. It was BAD. Feelings ran deep and even though I had no personal experience with Samaritans, I knew enough about them to keep them out of my inn.

So I put up that sign. "Jews only, no Samaritans welcome". I got quite a reputation that way. Religious ' I'll never forget the day it happened. Just down the road from my inn. Someone came in saying "another attack just south of here....I think the poor guy is dead". Someone else said "probably the Samaritans again...you know how they are when they get a few drinks" And so we all rushed to the window to see.

The priest in the story doesn't get a fair shake, you know. He's a good priest. He'd just been out on an errand of mercy and I know him. He was on his way to do his service at the synagogue. If he had touched that body, and if the man were dead, he'd be considered unclean and he'd be unable to work that day. Look it up in Leviticus. The rules are very strict. He'd simply be unable to work if he had touched a dead body. He DID stop in here, though, to ask us to see what we could do for him. Should he have stopped? Didn't he do all he could?

And the Levite - it's not fair that you think he was unkind either. Levites are priests' assistants. And he was a nice person. A horrible thing had happened to him not long ago. His brother had stopped to help someone on the side of the road just like that. But it had been a set up. The person wasn't hurt at all, and when his brother stopped to help, jumped up and attacked him. He died a few weeks later from his wounds.

So when the levite saw the injured person, I think I know how he felt. His brother's death came back to him, and he hurried off asking the first travellers he saw on the road to send for a doctor. Should he have stopped? Would you?

Things aren't always as clear as they seem are they? We watched all this from the window, and then, when the Samaritan came along, we thought "oh no – if the poor guy isn't dead now, THIS guy will finish him off for sure."

But no - we all watched in amazement as he brought him here – was it a trick? Should I even answer the door? My sign! My reputation – my guests –

My customers

But – I opened the door.

And the concern that Samaritan showed has...it's changed my life. No big fanfare about it – he didn't even ask to come in, or tell me his name....he left quickly – but you should have seen how tenderly he handled that man. His own things were stained with this stranger's blood, and the look on his face of real concern for him, and yet knowing that he wasn't welcome at my place....He gave me a couple of days' wages..it was a lot of money. Said he'd pay the balance when he came back through. I was deeply moved.

IN the same way that Jesus' stories didn't follow the rules, this Samaritan didn't follow the rules. Both the priest and the Levite had done acceptable and understandable things – they had followed the rules of their faith, and of politeness....but that Samaritan blew those rules out of the water. This was such a radical act it took my breath away. It...it changed my life.

And that's how I lost the inn. We went bankrupt. I took that sign out of my window. I hired a couple of Samaritans, began taking in whoever asked for a room, and promptly lost all my business. All my former customers. I just couldn't pay the bills. Samaritans are quite poor – I had to let it go. It hurt to lose the place, but you know.....I feel free now in a way –

We don't have as much money as we used to that's for sure. And we aren't accepted in the synagogue any more – because we have opened a shelter for people who are hurt and can't afford to pay for medical care.

I've learned that there is a cost to be paid for breaking the rules to help a neighbour.

I'm willing to pay it.

Are you???