

Our Own Salvation

A Sermon Expositing Luke 10:25-37

By Brent Bowden

First Baptist Church of Rochester

There is a shouting match going on within Christianity today. Working themselves out in public display are a handful of unimaginably important issues about which those who bear the name of Christ are having a family feud. We have been using the media and public institutions to yell at one another about the relationship between science and faith for decades now. More recently another disagreement has exploded onto the scene of public discourse, that of religious liberty. While we've been trying to decide if religious liberty is about protecting the rights and values of a particular branch of a particular religion over against all others *or* about protecting a safe and respectable marketplace of ideas the whole world has been subjected to the raucous quarrel. And perhaps no other fight has done more collateral damage recently than that about equality for LGBTQIA+ persons.

Certainly we could identify other areas of loud, public disagreement, but what we so often do not pay attention to are the quieter feuds roiling beneath the surface. How to interpret scripture and what its place is within faith is a fine example. Cable news outlets seldom invite representatives of opposing views to have it out live over the topic of biblical hermeneutics. Another is the nature of salvation. Christians understand this core component of belief in wildly diverging ways, but I have yet to be invited to a rally in support of or opposition to any theory of atonement. These arguments are quieter and therefore we might think they are of lesser importance. And it's true, they're not nearly as fun to scream and yell about as some others, but let us not be deceived. Some of these quieter disagreements between Christians make up the unnoticed, unmentioned foundation of the far more public and volatile differences among us.

Take, for instance, the seldom noticed, but ever present disparity between understanding Christianity to be primarily about individual salvation and understanding it to be about the redemption of the world. This is a seldom mentioned tension, in part because it is a difference in emphasis, not necessarily in kind. Few Christians would deny that God is at work in and on them personally. Likewise, few would deny that God is at work within the wider world. The difference lies in which is primary. Is God at work within me and you and you and you and *thereby* affecting change in the world? Or is God at work in the world and we are invited to be a part of that work and *thereby* our lives are impacted too? The difference between the two is so subtle that for most of us these function as assumptions more than beliefs, but there is a marked difference. If one assumes that faith is primarily individual they are likely to put a greater emphasis on spirituality, religious practice and discipline expecting that serving others will come as a byproduct. If one assumes rather, that faith is primarily about entering the ongoing redeeming work of God, they will emphasize acts of service, justice, and a life of

Note: Sermon manuscripts are written for the ear rather than the eye. If grammar or punctuation seem unconventional and the meaning unclear, try pronouncing the sentence aloud phonetically.

advocacy. Again, they are not mutually exclusive, but subtly, crucially different. So which is it? Is faith primarily about being saved or is it about participating in salvation? Or to ask that question another way, from whose place and perspective should we hear the parable of the Good Samaritan?

Because our congregation sits and many of us have resided for a long time firmly in the Walter Rauschenbusch tradition of socially concerned Baptists I imagine many of us approach this text assuming the place of the passerby on the road to Jericho. You recall the story of Jesus. A man on his way from Jerusalem to Jericho is attacked by bandits and severely wounded. He lies on the side of the road barely clinging to his life. A series of three passersby; a priest, a Levite, and a Samaritan all find him. The first two leave him there, but the Samaritan - the one least likely to demonstrate compassion in the minds of the story's hearers - *does* stop and shows extraordinary kindness saving the life of the man beaten.

For many of us viewing the story through the eyes of those who came upon the beaten man is a lesson in deciding whether or not to stop and help. Each of the men had obligations, responsibilities, limitations, pressures, and other concerns that are not expressly mentioned, but are implied by their identification as priest, Levite and Samaritan. We know that they would have had concerns about ritual purity that could have hindered them from serving in their priestly capacity had they stopped to help a near-dead man. There was a choice between serving one most likely hopeless man on the side of the road or serving an entire community of faithful worshippers. The story calls us to pit religious tradition against service and beckons that we choose service. The Samaritan we eventually see goes to considerable expense to help the man, thus the story calls us to examine our material investment in the work of compassion. The beaten man never has a voice in the story and his anonymity and hopelessness are almost certainly part of the reason the first two passersby were willing and able to dismiss him. The story calls us to face up to the fact that we all have the capacity to dehumanize those we deem hopeless or who we are not personally connected to or who have no voice. Viewing the story through the eyes of the passersby begs us to remember that even the hopeless aren't hopeless and that God will risk everything for a chance at redemption and healing. The story calls us to examine what might hinder us from costly engagement with the harshest realities in our world and encourages us to respond in the way of the Samaritan. Viewed through the lenses of the passersby the story of the Good Samaritan is a proof-text confirming the validity of the idea that serving others and being a part of the work of redemption is central to faith. And that is a very good thing!

But what if we didn't approach the story from the perspective of the passersby. It occurs to me that assuming we are those looking on to the unfortunate and deciding whether or not to help them is a privileged position. Not everyone could so easily imagine a scenario in which they have the capacity to be the helper in the story. So let us consider for a moment what reading the parable might sound like from the perspective of the man beaten. To be sure we have all experienced wounds in our lifetime, some of us have even experienced wounds so deep as to be debilitating and have had to rely upon the kindness of others to even survive. Others among us may have been so fortunate as to have never experienced wounds quite so deep, but recognize for a moment that this is a story about a man who was attacked by surprise and wounded so badly we might reasonably assume that he quickly entered shock and when found was unconscious. In other words he was badly injured and barely alive, but didn't yet know it. Dear friends, whether you *know it* or not, you *can* relate to this man.

Imagine yourself lying there bleeding and desperate, a kind of out-of-body experience looking at yourself from above. The only hope you have for renewed health and wholeness, for survival is that someone will render a kindness you cannot render for yourself. You are in need of saving. Your only hope is manifest

first in a priest and a Levite. You know at the outset that helping you would be more than an inconvenience to them. Helping you would not merely slow them on their journey, but would actually be a detriment to their own wellbeing. They could get in trouble for helping you, because they would be choosing you over against choosing those they were sworn to serve and doing so would preclude them for a time from serving. Their dilemma, to you though, would seem so insignificant. It's your *life* over against their tradition, over against religious expression, over against time management, over against cultural expectation. If we can engage deeply enough with our own pain to feel the weight of our life hanging in the balance, it doesn't seem like a balance anymore at all. Please, God send along the one who will weigh my life as worth more than these momentary concerns! Reading the story through the perspective of the beaten man calls us to engage our own woundedness and to know the joy of salvation that comes no matter the cost and without our participation indeed without our ability to participate. And that is a very good thing!

So which perspective on the story should be ours, the passersby or the beaten man? Should we understand that we are participants in the salvation of the world or that we are the object of salvation itself?

Don't forget this story is being told as an answer to a question. A student of religious law has asked Jesus, maybe trying to trap him in his words, what he must do to attain to life without limits. Jesus tells him simply to love God and love his neighbor. Pressing, the man asks who his neighbor is and this story is supposed to answer that question. The story is supposed to help him both identify neighborliness and discern the identity of his neighbor, the one he is supposed to love, and that is the key to understanding how one is saved. You see, we need both of these perspectives in order to understand how to love others as self. We must first know what it means to have our lives in the hands of others in order to understand what is at stake. Only then will we know the true weight of things when we decide between the lives of the beaten down and our own institutional, financial, social needs and obligations.

There is no either/or here. Engaging with the woundedness of others requires that we engage with our own woundedness. Recognizing our own woundedness in turn informs our engaging with the wounds of others. We must be at once the man beaten and the passerby. Only when we can take both perspectives on the story will we find that we've participated in our own salvation.

Amen.