

The Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10)

²⁵ Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus.^[1] "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ²⁶ He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" ²⁷ He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."²⁸ And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

²⁹ But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" ³⁰ Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹ Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³² So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. ³⁴ He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. ³⁵ The next day he took out two denarii,^[k] gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' ³⁶ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" ³⁷ He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

Galatians 3

²³ Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. ²⁴ Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, ²⁶ for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. ²⁷ As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, ^[k] heirs according to the promise.

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Galatians 3:23-29, Luke 10:25-37

“When All Means All”

Kerra Becker English

The next three weeks of sermons will outline my guiding principles when it comes to evangelism. Whenever I talk about the good news of God’s love, and the desire to spread that good news in the world, I hope to follow three principles. The first for today is: In Scripture, all means all. The good news is for ALL people. The second principle is: But that doesn’t mean Anything Goes. (Next week) And the third week will be about going out into the world with this news – the reminder for that week will be that always, always, the Outcomes belong to God alone.

1) All means all

2) But that doesn’t mean “Anything Goes”

3) The Outcomes are God’s

Even though I’ve made a personal commitment this year to think about, pray about, and teach about what I think evangelism means, I’ve spent most of my Christian experience trying to distance myself from the word “Evangelical.” During my teen years, when my faith identity was beginning to take shape, I had friends, including a boyfriend, who were heavy duty into the evangelical stance gaining popularity and broad television coverage at the time. One friend went to the Heritage USA theme park on vacation – which was part of the money making scam of Jim and Tammy Faye Baker. And in 1988, during my senior year of high school, the fall of Jimmy Swaggart happened over a sex scandal – his tearful confession publicized broadly. With those kind of stories in the news, it became crystal clear to me that those evangelists’ preaching about moral values had no real basis in their own morality.

Even then, those same friends, and sometimes their parents, did their best to try and get me to submit to their particular brand loyalty and repudiate my own. In fact, I think that one of them created Bible studies in which I became the project for conversion. I couldn't be the "right" kind of Christian if I didn't follow a certain prescription for behaviors and beliefs. Apparently, my little Presbyterian home church allowed me way too much leeway with my questions, and because they didn't criticize my music or worry about my short haircut and teenage disdain for wearing dresses, and because I they hadn't taught me all the correct opinions on the moral matters of the day, I might not turn out to be OK when it came to the end and I would have to justify myself to my Maker.

Therefore, the word *evangelical* got tied up in my mind with the kind of tribal cohesiveness and moral purity that seemed absolutely impossible for both leaders and followers in that movement to maintain. It seemed as though the more that these public leaders pushed for a certain interpretation of Christian values, the harder it was for them to live up to those values, something that continues right up to our own time. For me it was an early lesson in Christian hypocrisy. Since then I have learned that hypocrisy has many, many flavors – and certainly does not belong to a group of 80's televangelists alone.

So if we're going to be truly evangelical, and committed to being the tellers of the good news of the gospel, for me it's got to be far better news than what 80's era televangelists could muster. It can't promote such a narrow path and then expect people to perfectly follow it. That's not good news. That's terrible news. And it's the kind of terrible news that leads to judgment rather than acceptance, persecution rather than support, hate rather than love, and in our world we now know it brings about far more violence than peace. Because I know how awful my so

called “friends” could make me feel, and they claimed to be friends, I really don’t think that’s the branding Jesus had in mind.

. If there was something that my home church taught me well in the midst of all that, it has been the way in which the “good news of the gospel” sits in my mind as something totally unlike what that particular interpretation of evangelism seemed to be saying. Rather than requiring a certain look and taking moral upkeep to such an extreme, I was taught about all the rogues and miscreants of scripture, the kind of people whose scruffy faith seemed to keep the whole thing going, more in spite of -than because of - who they were. Truth be told about my little evangelism project, it’s really about being able to reclaim the word “evangelism” for myself, and for all the future questioning teenagers and for the wise church elders, the pastors and grandmothers and saints who raised me with the ability to receive a different kind of message.

Therefore, as I work to shelve those negative associations, I went directly back to the Bible and what I was taught about it to see if the news really is good, and worthy of our sharing with all the nations of the world, right? The good news of the gospel, the story to tell, I think, is found deep within the very specific kind of examples that Jesus uses for teaching and Paul, the apostle to the nations, backs up with all his rhetorical might. You see, to me it is absolutely, 100% clear that the good news is not glued to any particular place or time period’s hierarchy of human value or moral code of conduct, not theirs then, and certainly not ours now. The gospel does not discriminate according to where you come from, or how much money you have, or what gender you are, AND the gospel is good news for you whether or not you achieve moral purity. It’s just a little reminder, but, none of us is capable of moral perfection, so other than for Jesus himself, claiming either cultural or moral superiority can get one into trouble right quick!

Here's how I know this. Let's look at how Jesus answers the eternal life question. A lawyer asks him about that elusive ticket to heaven, and Jesus does what many good teachers do, he asks back, "What do you think?" The lawyer responds, correctly I might add, that the key to the kingdom is LOVE – love of God and love of neighbor. But, rather than being satisfied by his own answer; he demands to know how that works out by case and statute. Who exactly is this neighbor? Jesus' response upsets the whole apple cart. His story articulates that neighbor isn't the religiously pure priest. The neighbor isn't the socially important, and duty bound Levite. The neighbor is the object of this Jewish person's disdain and distrust – a Samaritan. The dirty, rotten, no-good Samaritan is the hero, the neighbor of the story who won't leave his fellow man to die in a ditch. Jesus tells the story as good news for any of us who find ourselves in that ditch and in need of a neighbor's help, saying this is the kind of neighbor we really should be for one another. But does the lawyer really hear it that way? The good news really ends up being for the Samaritan who finds himself on the underside of most Jewish stories. The lawyer could have expected a different answer and walked away unconvinced, though the story makes us hope that he was convicted by Jesus' story to live by offering kindness – not being the one that passes the victim by.

In Jesus' story, he doesn't directly tell the lawyer that when you talk about neighbors, all means ALL, but that's what he means by describing the story's characters the way he does. By being clear that the unexpected passerby is the "good" neighbor, we are reminded that even Samaritans can follow God's law when it comes to love – the LOVE that is the right answer. The good news is that love is the final answer, the ultimate accountability. Jesus came to earth to express God's love for all people to the point where it got him executed by people who were much more like the priests and Levites, the religious purists and cultural keepers of the status

quo, the good news tellers that want the news always written in their own words and with their own assumptions intact.

Though Paul's words often get taken out of context and twisted to point out God's list of likes and dislikes, Paul is actually the one who points out MOST clearly that all really means ALL. When he is reminding his readers like us that ALL people are children of God by faith he doesn't stop with just saying all, he too gets specific. But we are often inclined to indicate that "all" is more representative of the category "us." All means all **of us**, not including them. That's precisely the critique of the "all lives matter" response to the Black Lives Matter movement. All lives are NOT treated equally in our world, so to claim that in response to those on the underside raising their voices falls incredibly flat. Rather than do that, Paul very specifically reminds us of the categories, lest we forget, that God's children are both Jew AND Greek, both slave AND free, both male AND female.

Paul and Jesus, I think, would be big fans of raising up the unheard voices in our own times and places because they are the ones who need to hear, repeatedly, the good news that God's love is not just for the elite and virtuous, for the lawyers who ask questions about fulfilling God's commands. God's love truly is for EVERYONE.

Neither Jew nor Greek – Paul would remind us that our enemies' lives matter because Jesus died on the cross for them too. We are called to love them – not destroy them. Remember, Paul was Jesus' enemy once upon a time.

Neither slave nor free – Paul would remind us that black lives matter because the assumed guilt and harsh sentencing of young black men and the invisibility of poor black women tell us we don't think that's true.

Not male or female - Paul would remind us that women's lives matter because a judge's minimal sentence tells us that a male athlete's life is more important than that of the woman that he raped. And then he would warn us against idealizing a masculinity that idolizes power and a femininity that turns women into sex objects.

And though it's not included in the original text, I think that the Paul of right now would remind us that in God's kingdom, there is neither straight nor gay - that gay, lesbian, and transgender lives matter because he knew that the disparaging words that we use in fear and hate can so quickly become the triggers for acting out in violence.

In those multiple ways, the particularities of the Bible are there to keep us from thinking that we can comfortably always stay with our own kind and call it good news. The news isn't good for me unless it has the potential for being good news for everyone. God is love, not a conditional love, but with love that is abundant and absolutely is meant for all people. All means ALL.

There's just one more thing to make this particular concept of evangelism complete for me. The rebuttal I often hear to the good news being for ALL people, always touches on our human capacity for sin and evil. If the good news that God loves us fully is meant for ALL people, then what about that gunman who kills 50 people in a nightclub? What about the greedy financier who creates slave labor situations in another country? Or for that matter, what about me? What about my own sin? I can point at evil outside myself a million times over, but does God really love me when I have messed up again in my own nasty ways?

For it to really be the kind of good news that makes me not only want to talk about it but can change me completely deep inside, I have to truly have the freedom to take it or leave it.

Conditional acceptance also isn't good enough. The good news is that God loves me when I can't love me. God loves the people that I cannot in good conscience love on this side of eternity. I don't know how, and I can't completely explain it, but if the good news depends on me believing it to make it true, it's not very truthful. If the good news cannot change the minds and hearts of sinful people, then what good is it? The truth doesn't require adherents. It simply is. Experiencing the good news doesn't require minds and hearts to change, but God's love is in the business of doing just that, for me, for you, and probably for someone that you'd really love to hate. God is love – whether I'm acting in that love or not. All really does mean ALL.

When all those things come together, then the good news really kicks in for me. It isn't just that God loves all kinds of people. That's pretty good news in and of itself. The really great news, the kind that changes my mind and heart, is that God loves me just as I am, right now. I don't have to be anything I'm not. And from that good news, I draw strength and joy and my own sense of kindness. It's the kind of good news you want to talk about, for real, and not to put more people on a membership role, or get more money in the plates. It's the kind of life giving change that is worthy of the deepest kind of human conversation.

So it is precisely because we live in a world where all typically means only some, and because we are often told that God's love is conditionally dependant on something we either are, or do, or believe, that it is growing ever greater in importance that we share the message of abundant and freely given love that Jesus Christ gave as a gift to our world. Feel free to do that with whatever language, whatever actions feel most comfortable to you because it's about describing the good news of God's love to all people, even the scruffy ones, and without expectation, even for the intolerant and hateful ones, that Jesus lived his life and died on a cross for us all. Be brave. Be evangelists. Name it and claim it for ALL. Amen.