

Have you ever left your cell phone on a bus? Your wallet in a cab? Your Ipad or Kindle in a Hospital waiting room? If you have, you probably have no problem remembering the sense of panic. For a lot of us, our cell phones are a mini representation of our whole lives. Think about all the phone numbers, pictures, calendared appointments, and text messages we have stored in them. Granted, if we back them up on our computers or with our wireless carriers, it shouldn't be a big deal. But, given the fact that many people are too busy to make a backup plan and too cheap to buy phone insurance, losing one's phone is practically the equivalent of leaving one's life on a subway seat. It can almost be like losing an arm or a leg!

What's it worth to you? That's certainly not the first thing you want to hear from someone who has found something you lost, or out of the mouth of a "good" Samaritan for that matter? Many of us assume there's a kind of unwritten agreement between losers and finders, and when we're on the finding end we get a special kind of rush when we're able to unite someone with their lost valuables.. The gushing gratitude of the recipient is usually enough reward for most people.

But, clearly, not everyone feels this way. Some people look at the misfortune of others as an opportunity to make a quick buck. Call them "bad Samaritans." Bad Samaritans are focused primarily on maximizing their reward or, in some sense, recouping something of what they believe society owes them. Take the case of Los Angeles-based writer Andrew Cohn, who was cleaning up after a backyard party and found a wallet on the ground with \$40 in it. "I'd just spent \$500 on the party," says Cohn. "I figured the money was the girl's contribution." He kept the money and left the wallet, with ID and credit cards, on the ground.

How did Cohn justify his actions? Well, he says, "If you expect someone's going to return your wallet with all the cash, you're probably a little delusional." Davy Rothbart, who edits a magazine called *Found*, which features photos of lost objects, agrees with Cohn. "Really good Samaritans, if they find a wallet, they return it intact," he says. "Some people find a wallet, take the money, but return the important stuff. That's not evil."

So, what does that make someone such as Cohn — a semi-good Samaritan? And what if you find a wallet but really need the money right *now*; does that make it okay to keep it as long as you give back the "important" stuff? Is "finders-keepers, losers weepers" an ethical escape clause?

I'm guessing that most of us in worship this morning would say no to all the above of, or at least I hope that we would. After all, many of us have been schooled in Scripture such as the Ten Commandments, or we claim to at least follow the Golden Rule of do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Perhaps if you have ever tried reading the Bible in its entirety, after finishing up the book of Numbers you came across the twenty second chapter of Deuteronomy, which instruct the Israelites on precisely what to do when they find a stray sheep or ox: They take it back to the owner with no expectation of, or provision for, any kind of reward. Whether it's sheep or cell phones, demanding a reward from a vulnerable person is nothing less than extortion.

The lesson here would seem to be obvious, particularly when we compare the behavior of bad Samaritans to the Good Samaritan in Jesus' famous parable. When we read this passage a little more closely, however, we begin to see that the story has an even deeper dimension to it than just the ethics of helping. It really has to do with how we view people and, more specifically, whether we believe in the kindness of strangers.

Psychologists say that how we perceive strangers is a microcosm of how we perceive the world. If we believe that most people are intrinsically unethical and that they'd put the screws to us if given a chance, then we are much more likely to put the screws to someone else if, say, we find a wallet or a cell phone or, as in Jesus' story, if we find him or her battered on the side of the road. People who see strangers as outsiders, as enemies or as something less than themselves will default to treating them that way, rather than as equals, or, to use Jesus' term, as "neighbors."

The key to discovering helpful insights from this parable is to examine the question that prompts it. A lawyer asks Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" This is a question about ultimate rewards. For a first-century Jew, "eternal life" meant the life of the age to come, the ultimate covenant blessing that was in store for God's chosen people. The lawyer perceived himself to be a member of the covenant community who, like many of his people at the time, held clear ideas about who was within the covenant boundaries set by the Torah and who was outside — who were friends and who were strangers.

Jesus questions him about the Torah law, and the lawyer gives the right answer — his response probably came from a daily Jewish prayer called a Shema or from Deuteronomy 6:5, which was about love for God, and its companion piece was mostly likely from Leviticus about loving one's "neighbor" as oneself. The definition of *neighbor* is the sticking point for this

lawyer, so he presses Jesus for a legal opinion. Luke says the lawyer wanted to “justify” himself, which is a way of saying he was concerned about defining his “neighbors” as follows: *“My neighbor is a fellow Jew, i.e., someone who lives within the covenant boundaries of Judaism.”*

Asking Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” was like saying, “You’re talking about our own people, right?” Like many of the people of Jesus’ day, the lawyer apparently had big issues with strangers. To take this a step further, as he was trying to justify himself, he may have been trying to figure who he absolutely had to help versus the individuals he could ignore! What could he get away with doing or not doing?

Jesus teaches the lawyer and us a valuable lesson about seeing everyone around us as a neighbor! He opens our eyes to help us look beyond our relatives, beyond our friends at church, and beyond the people that live next door to us, that we actually like! The renowned story Jesus tells is one that has become so familiar to us that we often miss the scandalous implications of it for people such as the lawyer. A man is on his way down the Wilderness Road from Jerusalem to Jericho, which implies that he is a Jew, when he gets set upon by robbers who beat him and leave him for dead. A priest and a Levite, who should be obvious “neighbors” to their fellow Jew, both pass by on the road and refuse to help. Maybe they had good reasons; for example, their involvement with a battered body might make them ritually unclean to work in the temple, not to mention the fact that the robbers could still be in the area! Although Jesus doesn’t elaborate on their reasons for not wanting to get involved, the fact that these two are representatives of the Torah and its covenant rituals and boundaries is very significant. The priest and the Levite — and, by association, the Torah and the sacrificial system — fail to act in order to save one of their own.

So who does the saving in our story today? A Samaritan, a stranger and an enemy of Israel. To most first-century Jews, “good Samaritan” would have been a laughable oxymoron, as these half-breed people with their own temple were considered pariahs. However, the Samaritan in Jesus’ parable stops, renders aid and takes care of the Jewish victim’s expenses. He does what the victim’s “own people” should have done for him but didn’t!

Although we most often read and understand this story from the perspective of the Samaritan who helps, Jesus hammers home the point from the perspective of the victim in answering the lawyer’s question with a question of his own. “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” The stunning answer was, of

course, that the Jew in the ditch discovered *that the Samaritan was his neighbor and that the others — those geographically, ethnically and religiously similar — were not.*

Perhaps Jesus was giving the crowd, the lawyer, everyone listening to his story, and even us, a foreshadowing of what he will do through his death on the cross? While I was studying this text this week I began to think about how in some way the religious leaders probably viewed Jesus as having a lot of traits in common with the Samaritans. A majority of them regarded him as their enemy, and Jesus said a lot of things that contradicted the Jewish religion. In their eyes and understanding many of his teachings were considered heresy.

Like the Good Samaritan in Jesus parable, the last person the Pharisees would ever expect to help, let alone save a broken and battered Jewish man, Jesus is the least likely person to fit into their understanding of the Messiah, the savior of their Nation and the World. In fact, it is possible that Jesus is the Good Samaritan of his own story. Those listening are the ones who are battered, broken, lying in a ditch, and only he can save them and pay the full price to restore them to health and righteousness.

“What must I do to inherit eternal life?” The lawyer’s question was the same as that of the rich young man in Luke 18, and Jesus’ answer is essentially the same: You must *learn a new way to be God’s covenant people and a new way of understanding God’s kingdom.* And, for starters, you must redefine your definition of “neighbor” to include the stranger and the outsider. Jesus would live that out by spending time with the outcasts and, interestingly, the tax collectors who made their living essentially by extortion! Following Jesus means we are called to “go and do likewise.” We are called to see others not as good or bad Samaritans, but as people who deserve our presence and our help.

As God’s people we are never to play “finders-keepers,” nor are we to see ourselves as being more deserving or better than anyone else. When it comes to the kindness of strangers, we tend to get what we expect. If we’re kind and helpful to people we don’t know, or who are in trouble, in every circumstance, then we’re more likely to see that kindness returned. Even if we don’t receive reciprocal care and help, we know that God has called us to love the stranger regardless. That’s what it means to be God’s people.

Things do have a way of coming back around to justice eventually. Take Andrew Cohn, for example. A few hours after he replaced the now cash-poor wallet back on the ground, the owner knocked on his door. Cohn opened the door to find a drop-dead gorgeous woman standing

on his porch. Although she was sad her money was gone, she was glad to have her wallet and credit cards back. She was so glad, that Cohn thought she would possibly agree to go out with him. Problem is, he didn't get her number, and a mutual friend wouldn't give it to him. The friend's reason, "You can't ask out a girl if you just took her money. Right?" Maybe like the lawyer in our story Cohn will learn to look beyond his own needs and desires, maybe he will learn to live his life for others, and maybe as he practices being selfless he will discover what it truly means to be a good neighbor.

Now, we may read Jesus parable about the Samaritan and think only of "the high cost of caring," but it is far more costly not to care. The priest and the Levite lost far more by their neglect than the Samaritan did by his concern. They lost the opportunity to become better men and good stewards of what God had given them. They could have been a good influence in a bad world, but they chose to be a bad influence. The Samaritan's one deed of mercy has inspired sacrificial ministry all over the world. We should never say that such ministry is wasted! God sees to it that no act of loving service in Christ's name is ever lost.

It all depends on our outlook. To the thieves, this traveling Jew was a victim to exploit, so they attacked him. To the priest and Levite, he was a nuisance to avoid, so they ignored him. But to the Samaritan, he was a neighbor to love and help, so he took care of him. Whether we know it or not, all of us have been beaten and have fallen into a ditch of sin and death, and yet Jesus has rescued us and has even paid the full price for our eternal care! What Jesus said to the lawyer, He says to us: "Go and keep doing it likewise!" And Thanks be to God for that! AMEN