

FILLING OUR BIBLICAL BACKPACKS FOR THE JOURNEY: THE
COMMANDMENTS OF JESUS

A Sermon preached at Broadview Community UCC

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Scriptures: Luke 10: 25-37; Luke 15: 1-2, 11-32

We enter our third week of choosing which essential scriptures we want to put into our biblical backpacks as we journey through Lent and claim the name of Christian, followers of Jesus. And we are using a specific lens through which we view the Bible:

God loves us and came to us in Jesus to show us how to love that we all might have life and have it abundantly.

So we have already placed four scriptures into our packs and today we examine two more that we will carry with us. And I want to remind you of that “assignment” I gave you on the first Sunday: what scriptures are essential to you as a follower of Jesus? I don’t have the time with you to develop a comprehensive list so I am counting on all of you to fill in the blanks.

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We in the United Church of Christ talk often about how inclusive we are and how everyone is welcome – no matter what you believe or where you are on life’s journey. But Jesus, while being very inclusive and accepting, did offer up some ways of being, of living that are strong enough we can call them Commandments. We generally do not like commandments. For many of us, commanding us to do or be a certain way is likely to evoke resistance from us. But the stories we heard a few moments ago are more than stories – they are strong words from Jesus, “Go and do likewise.”

Today we pay attention to two of the most well-known stories told by Jesus – the Good Samaritan and the story of the Prodigal Son. Those of us who have spent time in the church have heard these stories over and over. We can probably tell them to each other with some ease. And even if you are fairly new to church, it is likely you have heard these stories. Just begin, “There was a man who had two sons,” and many people, churched or not, will recognize the parable of the Prodigal Son. But aside from their familiarity and good moral teachings, why choose these specific stories to put in our backpacks? What special teachings or direction do they give us that help define our Christian life? Normally, I would spend a whole sermon on each story so this will be a quick overview with some questions that I want to ask so we can look at what is familiar in a different way.

It is helpful to remember that parables are designed to disrupt the status quo and create feelings of challenge and provocation. They are supposed to leave us feeling uncomfortable. And Jesus almost always tells them with the aim of helping us figure out how to live more abundantly, how to be more fully compassionate.

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So let's begin with the Samaritan story. It is essential to begin with the lawyer's question: "What do I need to do to get eternal life?" In other words, let's get down to basics: what are the minimum essentials I have to do? You tell me says Jesus, always a good teacher. Well, the torah says to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength and mind; and to love your neighbor as yourself." Right, says Jesus, do that and you will live abundantly. And that should have been the end of the conversation. Jesus affirms what God requires from us; Love God completely and our neighbor as much as we want to be loved.

But this lawyer is a bit of a wise-guy and instead of simply saying Thank you very much, he pushes Jesus: "Well, just how would *you* define neighbor?" And Jesus tells the story. There are a couple of important features in this story that we should mention. First, the priest and Levite who pass by the man in the ditch who was robbed, beaten and left for dead are not necessarily bad guys although perhaps selfish. They ask themselves, "If I stop to help this man what will happen to me? Are the robbers still around and will I get attacked? We probably all know that feeling of being uneasy about getting involved in crimes or disputes. I suspect many of us, seeing a victim, might be cautious or choose to not get involved.

Second, the Samaritan really was a despised person. Tradition has called him the "Good" Samaritan but scripture does not. Samaritans were hated because they had aided the Syrian leaders in their wars against the Jews. For Jesus to choose a Samaritan as the hero of the story was a stunning move. He selected the ultimate outsider and a very hated one at that.

Perhaps, if we put this in a contemporary light we might tell the story this way: An American soldier is attacked in Afghanistan and left by the side of the road to die. Two Afghan soldiers pass by but afraid, do not stop to help. But a member of Al Qaeda stops and cares for the soldier and takes him to a nearby clinic. That shocks us as much as using a Samaritan in the story shocked those who heard Jesus. It forces us to turn our thinking upside down. A member of a group who has pledged to destroy us and our country could actually save one of our lives? Impossible! And yet...that is exactly what Jesus is trying to say. The neighbor we are called to love as much as we love ourselves is someone we may hate and fear and despise. This turns a sweet, "Love your next-door neighbor" commandment into something difficult and demanding.

Biblical scholar A.J. Levine has said of this parable that it asks us to consider this: "If we can put a human face on both victim and the one who ideally wants to destroy him but nevertheless shows compassion, we might be able to talk with each other. We have to give each other a chance because if we don't we'll all die in that ditch."

Martin King Jr. said of this parable that the priests asked the question: "If I stop to help this man what will happen to me? The Samaritan asks: "If I don't stop to help this man, what will happen to him?"

Jesus asks this of us – impossible as it sounds - love with compassion the one who is not only a stranger but also one who is feared. Expand your idea of neighbor in a difficult way. Who do you find most difficult to call neighbor? For me, Fred Phelps, leader of the Westboro Baptist Church, who died this week, is someone I struggle to see as neighbor. He caused so much pain in his ranting, picketing, and general message that God is a God of hate not love. I do not want to accept him as my neighbor, someone I am called to love as much as myself. But this man, and his church, are, nevertheless my neighbor. For Jesus invites us to leave the safety of “the known” and live in places where comfort may fall away but where we may also changed to become more loving. So into the backpack goes this story with its very uncomfortable demand; but also the possibility that living out this story just might help us *all* to have abundant life.

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Our next well-known story begins, “There was a man who had two sons...” Why does this particular story belong in our biblical backpack? What does it say to us that helps define us as Christians, as followers of Jesus?

This younger son really screwed up. First he asks for all the money he would inherit and then he totally wastes it. No wonder he needs to come crawling back home. He has no other place to go. And he expects, as many of us might, that his father will be so angry with him that the best he can expect is to become a servant in the household. I wonder how repentant the son actually is here. Oh, he says some of the right things “I’ve sinned, I don’t deserve to be called your son” but given his history, I wonder if he secretly hopes the father will forgive him.

The father sees his son standing there looking miserable, and he is filled with compassion, and runs, embraces, kisses his son. With extravagant love Dad calls for the best clothing and food to be brought and he orders up a party – let’s have a barbecue with the best cow I have.

This is a good moment in the story for we can identify with the relief of the son and the joy of the father. But some looking on might ask, “Wait a minute here. Shouldn’t you at least scold your son a little? At least you should hear his confession before considering forgiveness. What about tough love? Younger son needs to be held accountable in some way.

That is what the older son thinks. He does not run to greet his brother. He does not appear to approve of his father’s loving generosity. Instead, he complains. And he voices the complaint of “good” siblings everywhere. I suspect we all have done it. No fair, I’m always responsible and work hard and you never give me special parties. And he stomps off.

I think my favorite part of the story is when the father goes to find the older son – he knows he is upset and instead of just shrugging this off, the father seeks him out. And he tries to explain by speaking those very loving words: “Son, you are with me all the time

and everything that is mine is yours. But we have to celebrate because this brother of yours was dead and now he is alive. He was lost and now is found.”

We don't know how the older brother responded to those words as the story ends there. But we know about families. We know that they are far from perfect; we know that among siblings how we are treated by our parents may not be completely fair. But the message the father gives is clear: like it or not, we are all family. If we lose one person, the family is not whole. We need everyone. Part of the generous love and compassion expressed by the father is that belief that whether we like or not, being part of the family means accepting the other members – as imperfect as they, and we, are.

It is a little like a church, right? There are other members who may drive us crazy; they don't do their fair share of the work; they talk too much; they complain too much; it really is not fair. But Jesus told this story to say in part, our God is a God of such generous and extravagant love, that all are welcomed into the family of God. Have some compassion for one another, says Jesus, for all carry burdens of some kind. And if we cannot come to church after our life has fallen apart, where on earth can we go? Because here in this community God loves you as you are. And so do we.

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We place both of these stories into our backpack because they remind us that learning how to love means being compassionate and generous. It means looking beyond the stereotypes we so easily fall into believing. It means that if God loves us so completely with all of our failings we can at least try and do that with others. We, and those we fear or dislike, belong to God and therefore to one another. We all stand in need of God's grace. These scriptures teach us that seeing the face of God in another, helps us take the first steps toward love hard as that may be.

God loves us and came to us in Jesus to show us how to love that we all might have life and have it abundantly. Thanks be to God.