

Samaritans and Innkeepers

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Today's Scripture is one of the most well-known passages in the whole Bible – the story of the Good Samaritan. It even has morphed into an expression that is used all the time – in religious and non-religious settings – be a good Samaritan. I'm sure you've heard it before. Basically, it means someone did something to help somebody else. I did a quick google search of "Good Samaritan media headlines" and on the first page of results I found a news article on both Fox News and the BBC with headlines using the phrase Good Samaritan to describe an act of kindness towards someone. Now, there's probably not a whole lot that Fox News and BBC have in common, but both newsrooms felt like their readers would know exactly what the phrase Good Samaritan meant. Good Samaritans are people who help other people.

When we read this story, we often see the Samaritan as the hero of the story, the person who demonstrated what Jesus meant by loving our neighbors. Jesus says as much himself at the end when he tells the lawyer (and us) to go and do likewise, go and be like the Samaritan. And what exactly does Jesus mean we are to be like?

He means we are to help those in need.

He means we should work to overcome racial and ethnic divisions.

He means we should offer help even to one who might consider us an enemy.

It's a profoundly important message and one that I have preached many times and one that you will probably hear me preach again at some point. But today, I want us to look at this story from the perspective of another character, one who we often think just plays a filler role in the story – the innkeeper.

You see, the beauty of Jesus' parables is that they never have a single solitary meaning. Parables invite us to read familiar stories with new eyes, to see that these teachings of Jesus are not static set in stone, but vibrant, living, and complex. Parables are not only something that we read but they also read us, meaning that by trying to relate to the characters in this story, we learn things about ourselves as well. What do we learn if we read this story from the perspective of the priest and Levite? Or the beaten man? Or the Samaritan? I would encourage you to do that sometime. Put yourself in their shoes. But today, I want us to imagine ourselves as the innkeeper. What does the parable say to us when we read it from that perspective?

When I was in college, I began attending a church where about ½ the congregation were members of the homeless community. In fact, it was in that church where I discovered that God was calling me to be a minister. Fast forward about 15 years and I was a part of a group that raised money to help that church launch it's own non-profit that would help unhoused people find permanent housing. My friend Avery Rhodes became the first executive director of this new venture that is called Community on the Rise.

Community on the Rise's mission was to provide long-term pathways to journey alongside people from homelessness to housing, addiction to recovery, poverty to employment that pays a living wage. Knowing that there were other organizations that meet short term needs of food and shelter, Community on the Rise saw their role as developing opportunities to help people find long-term wholeness rather than meeting short-term needs. But with COVID-19 their plans had to change. Many soup kitchens weren't able to safely provide meals. Shelters were not accepting new clients. All of a sudden, there were massive short term needs, massive basic survival needs that those members of the homeless community were experiencing every day. So Avery, and the Community on the Rise team, changed their focus in response to how COVID has affected the homeless community and have begun providing meals for people seven days a week but what's more amazing than that is how they did it.

They received funding to provide breakfast every day by partnering with two local restaurants whose businesses had been decimated by COVID. The restaurants would cook breakfast every morning and Community on the Rise would pay them for the meals. Then volunteers would take the meals and bring them to a nearby park where they distributed them to anyone who needed a good meal.

What was so cool about this is that Community on the Rise not only fed homeless people but also provided business to two restaurants so they could keep paying their staff as they rode out the pandemic. And what's even more cool about that is often downtown restaurants can have an adversarial relationship with those experiencing homelessness as they worry that people panhandling outside their restaurant will run customers away.

Community on the Rise has come up with an amazing idea that is a win-win situation for restaurants and their staffs and the homeless community by bringing together two communities – the homeless and the restaurant staff – that at times may have seen each other as adversaries. But during that time, those restaurants needed their homeless clients to generate the income to keep going. And those experiencing homelessness needed the food the restaurants cooked. Community on the Rise created a way for the restaurant owners to serve the homeless community not by doing something that they don't normally do, but by using their vocation, by preparing food – what they do all the time, to meet the basic needs of our most vulnerable citizens.

What is so brilliant about what Community on the Rise is did is that they found ways for people to make an impact – not by doing something they don't know how to do – but by using the very thing they know best, their own business, to serve those in need.

I wanted to tell that story today because I think those business owners are very much like the innkeeper in our Scripture. So often we think that our example in this story should be the Good Samaritan. And certainly, the Good Samaritan is someone who was truly heroic. And I imagine all of us could point to modern day examples of people who selflessly give of themselves in amazing ways. But the Samaritan is not the only person in the story who made a difference. The innkeeper did as well.

The innkeeper was a small business owner. His livelihood came from people paying him money for him to provide them a place to stay. I imagine he was someone who took pride in his work, who wanted to offer his guests the very best – both because I imagine him to be a person of integrity but also because giving the guests a good experience is simply a smart business decision – it will make them want to come back. But here's the thing – while we think of the Samaritan in the story as the ultimate example of what it means to love one's neighbor as we love ourselves, the innkeeper actually took care of the injured man much longer than the Samaritan.

The Samaritan was on a journey – we don't know where he was going, but we know that he wasn't able to stay with the beaten man until he was well enough to continue his journey alone. So the Samaritan took him to the inn, paid the innkeeper to house him and look after him, and then went on his way. The innkeeper took it from there. And I think there's at least three lessons we can learn from the innkeeper's perspective in this story.

First, the innkeeper could help the man simply by being an innkeeper, by doing what an innkeeper does – providing hospitality to those who need it. I think so often, we tend to think that our service to others must be something different than what we know how to do. When I was at my first church where many of my congregants lived in deep poverty, I had a call from a local attorney who wanted to organize a back to school drive for our kids – to provide school supplies, backpacks, and so on. Now here's the thing, we already had a group doing a back to school drive for us. We didn't need to do another one. But you know what we did need? A lawyer. We had so many people who had legal needs – from grandparents needing legal custody of their grandchildren, to people with misdemeanor fines, to people being wrongly evicted from their apartments – and none of them could afford a lawyer. You see, we didn't need this man to be anything other than what he was. We needed him to come and serve as a lawyer – to do the very thing that he knew best. And when I told him that, it was like a light bulb went off in his head. He not only came but he brought his whole law office several times a year to have a free legal clinic. And it made a huge difference. Maybe a first step for all of us in thinking about how we can serve others is to start by what we know, start by what we do for a living and use that to make the world a better place.

Secondly, the innkeeper and the Samaritan worked together to care for the man. Without both of them – the Samaritan finding and initially caring for the man and the innkeeper giving him a place to stay, the man would have not gotten better. It took the Samaritan and the Innkeeper working together. Before starting her PhD program, Mary Page was the strategic initiatives

director for a grant making non-profit called the Women's Fund of Greater Birmingham. When Mary Page started working there they looked at all the non-profit organizations caring for single mothers living in poverty and realized that they were all doing good things, but a single mother would have to go to one place to get help with childcare, another place to go back to school or receive job training, another place to get help with transportation. So they worked to bring stakeholders together so that for instance a woman can now go to a local community college and have childcare on site. They understood that no person (or organization or church) can do everything that needs to be done alone. We have to find ways to collaborate and work together. As an aside, that's one reason why our community conversations as part of our strategic planning work are so important. We will never be able to do all that God is calling us to do by ourselves. That's why it's so important to find ways we can work with other congregations, with the town, with local non-profits because we can do so much more together just like the Samaritan and the innkeeper did.

And finally, the innkeeper had a non-discriminatory business. We don't know whether he was a Jew or a Samaritan, but what we do know is that he had no trouble working with a Samaritan and he had no trouble renting a room to and taking care of a Jewish man. His business was open to all.

So my hope in reading this story from the perspective of the innkeeper is to realize that we all have a role to play in caring for those in need. A few people may be like the Good Samaritan, but my guess is that far more of us are like the innkeeper. And that's ok. We are invited to use what we already know to care for those in need and when a Samaritan shows up at our doorstep with someone who has been beaten down by life, to respond with grace and compassion and offer that person the very best we have to offer no matter who they are or who we need to work with – just like the innkeeper did in our story.