

Preaching the Good Samaritan: A Feminist Perspective

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Preaching the Good Samaritan of Luke 10 from a feminist perspective takes us to the periphery of the parable, to the side of the road alongside the one stripped, beaten, and left for dead. The Good Samaritan leads us into the interconnection of love of God, self, and neighbor. The Good Samaritan balances care of the other with care of self. The Good Samaritan relies on a sense of teamwork or community in ministry and healing. All of these emphases are feminist concerns. As only a preacher can intuit, this Lukan passage is replete with points for the Sunday sermon.

Loving Self

The Biblical injunction in Luke 10:27 presents an interconnection: "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." The parable has traditionally been understood by commentators to be an elaboration of what it means to "love your neighbor." Commentators have also shown that love of neighbor is intimately tied up with love of God. A feminist reading concerns itself with the more subtle interconnection implied in the text: love your neighbor as yourself. A feminist perspective underscores what women often do not hear: love your neighbor *as yourself*.

In a culture that devalues traditional feminine virtues and role and places more value on a son than a daughter, women struggle with self-esteem. Battering, abusive, and exploitative relationships add to this low self-image. In the "American culture of fleshly beautification and youthful beatification, women have identified themselves with their bodies and inevitable decay."¹ In institutions and power structures that are run by males, women as the powerless ones can become the target group, a despised group, in sinister and subtle ways.² Women can easily identify with the wounded person who was left half-dead in the parable. When current statistics are considered, when estimates reveal that one out of four women are raped, that one-third of female children and adolescents under age eighteen experience significant sexual abuse, that violence occurs in one-third to one-half of all families in the United States,³ the language of being "stripped, beaten, and left for half-dead" loses its metaphorical quality and becomes literal.

It is only from the periphery of the parable, from the side of the road, wounded and devalued, as one receives the mirroring of God's perfect love through the compassion of the Good Samaritan, that a person has a kairotic moment of understanding that she/he is of cosmic concern and immense worth to God. This is the foundational understanding of a loved self. Love of self in this Biblical sense is always interconnected with love of God and neighbor, thus avoiding the dangers of narcissism, ontological individualism, selfishness, utilitarian individualism, egotism, and romantic individualism which posits the isolated self as the only valid reality in the universe with the maximization of self-interest.⁴

Love of self for a woman is the conviction that she is of infinitely great value and immense worth. A woman comes to the understanding that she has absolute value before God. This perception may run counter to society's attempt to grant her relative value. Philosophical theologian Diogenes Allen utilizes the Samaritan parable to illustrate the absolute value of a person, in contrast to a person's relative value. The Samaritan acknowledges the intrinsic worth of the one stripped and beaten. This compassion is a mirroring of God's perfect love and, in the Samaritan passage, is described as "being moved to pity."⁵

To love a thing is to see a thing as existing in its own right — to go out to its existence. And to go out to a thing in this way when it is a living thing, and particularly when it is a living person, is *fundamentally to have pity for it*....The insight into its existence is at the same time an insight into its suffering, its defenselessness, its profound vulnerability.⁶

The loved self is a self-in-relationship-to God. Persons have absolute value because they have been created to receive God's presence.⁷ The absolute value of a person is based on God, who alone is wholly good. This philosophically theological premise offers another dimension to the title *Good Samaritan*.

Who is the Good Samaritan in this transformative text? How does a person encounter this Samaritan? Exegetically, we cannot avoid the christological import of the text, Luke 10:29-37. Although it cannot be definitely said that the Good Samaritan is Jesus Christ in the parable, it can be said that Christ was a "unique realization" of the Good Samaritan. However, to say that Christ intended the Good Samaritan to represent himself as he related to wounded and fallen humanity is more than can be said.⁸ One New Testament scholar, David Tiede, has depicted the parable as indication or "object lessons in human scale" of the reign of God's grace, which Jesus deploys.⁹ Another New Testament commentator, David Moessner, sees the life-giving journey of Jesus as "mirrored by this foreigner."¹⁰ What prompts a person to move from a sense of relative value to an awareness of being a "loved self" could be encountering individuals who to her represent the Good Samaritan and who mirror God's compassion. Imaged as a self-in-relation-to God, a person becomes aware that she is of cosmic concern, of intense value, of immense worth. In short, she understands her absolute value.

Finishing the Journey

In our customary way of reading the Good Samaritan text, women have not acknowledged a crucial aspect to the passage, an aspect so significant that it shatters previous interpretations. The Samaritan finished the journey. The Samaritan finished the journey while meeting the need of a wounded and marginal person. "The Samaritan did not give everything away; in this enigmatic parable, he did not injure, hurt, or neglect the self. He loved himself, and he loved his neighbor."¹¹ This balance in the care of self/care of other is a difficult balance for many. It is often women who have excelled in the care of the other. To be able to care for another(others) and to be able to finish one's journey in life is a message to be proclaimed from the pulpit.

Others have worked on this complex interplay of self and other. *In A Different Voice* by Carol Gilligan presents a developmental sequence in the care of self/others.

Gilligan suggests that women's development moves through three phases.¹² The first phase centers on care for oneself. A transition occurs when this first position is seen as egoistic and when a concept of responsibility develops. In the second phase, caring for others is equated with what is good. A disequilibrium occurs as the person neglects to give care to herself and to receive care. Caring is confused with self-sacrifice that neglects the self of the caregiver. A transition can only occur when this dilemma is seen. In Gilligan's third phase, a new and healthy connection develops between self and other with both self-knowledge and an aversion to self-exploitation. Thus, the movement in Gilligan's sequence is from a narcissism to an altruism to an interdependence between self and other.

Relating Gilligan's schema to the Good Samaritan text, one could easily imagine the priest and the Levite as illustrative of stage one, caring for oneself. With a traditional reading of the Lukan parable, the Samaritan could be easily seen as representative of stage two, caring for the other equals the good. What then within the text could represent a healthy connection between self and other?

The usual sequence within the Lukan text is as follows. The robbers represent the infantile position: what is yours is mine. The priest and Levite exhibit a narcissistic worldview: what is mine is mine. The Samaritan, given a customary reading, depicts the traditionally "feminine" altruistic posture: what is mine is yours.

It is only in acknowledging that the Samaritan finished his journey while meeting the need of a marginal and hurting person that this interaction between self and other can be articulated: what is mine is mine, but I have enough to share. The Samaritan as paradigm for ministry represents love of self and neighbour, with love of God imbedded in the parable, and illustrates what it is to be a self-in-relation.¹³

Christ himself as realization of the Good Samaritan could be seen to demonstrate a fourth level of interaction in the parable: what is mine is yours. This authentic self-sacrifice does stand at the core of the Christian gospel. However, it is predicated on the fact that there is a sense of self to sacrifice. Many women do not have this sense of self; thus, self-sacrifice is misinterpreted to mean self-annihilation.

Locating the Inn

The Good Samaritan passage preached from a feminist perspective will underscore the function of the inn. The Samaritan took the wounded person to an inn, instructed the innkeeper to take care of him, with the promise to return and cover additional expenses.

In application and extension of the "inn" in ministry, the inn may be a support group, a battered women's shelter, a halfway house, a hospital, a rape crisis center, therapy, a pastoral counseling center, a specialized support group such as Bosom Buddies or Resolve or AA. The inn may be the church. The inn may be a place of spiritual shelter, a retreat center, or a house of prayer. In an exegetical attempt to understand the inn in Luke 10, commentators do agree that the inn was a temporary lodging place, a place where a journeying person found room for the night. This night can surely include the "night of the soul," a place of struggle and despair. Preaching the Good Samaritan from a feminist perspective brings to the pulpit an awareness of a sense of teamwork and community in ministry and healing. At a minimum, from the sermon itself, a pastor can describe the inn and give directions.

Loving God

Luke 10:38-42 extends the meaning of the parable of the Good Samaritan. In this story of the listening Mary and the industrious Martha, the exposition of what it means to love God has traditionally been found in the role of Mary. One commentator, Charles Talbert, has concluded that loving God means receiving from God.¹⁴ Thus, Mary becomes the exemplary one.

From a feminist perspective, the surprise in the text comes from the model offered, a model moving away from the autonomous individual like Mary. The model comes not from one individual person but from two individuals, two women, who when taken together offer a picture of what it means to love God. In the narrative of Mary and Martha, the Christian is offered a model for linking receptivity and activity, being and doing, care receiving and care giving, loving self and others. The Christian pastor is reminded: at the base of our nurturing is the continual need for our own nurture.

Preaching to the Preacher

The Good Samaritan with a feminist reading creates personal points for the pastor's daily living. Moving away from the traditional developmental emphases on autonomy, individuation, and self-sufficiency as goals of maturity which, in turn, impact models of ministry, the Good Samaritan moves the pastor into a paradigm that underscores two essential types of interconnectedness. One is the interplay of love of neighbor, God, and *self*. Another is ministry's relatedness to other disciplines in healing and a need for shared responsibility in the care of the other as the pastor takes them to the "inn." In a culture where ministers are experiencing self-depletion and overwhelming societal need, this is the message of the Good Samaritan parable to them. This is where, as a feminist would say, the pastoral is personal.

NOTES

¹ Jeanne Stevenson Moessner, "A New Pastoral Paradigm and Practice," in *Women in Travail and Transition: A New Pastoral Care*, ed. Stevenson Moessner and Glaz (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1991), 204

² Lillian B. Rubin, *Women of a Certain Age: The Midlife Search for Self* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), 69

³ Jean Baker Miller, *Toward a New Psychology of Women*, 2d ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), foreword xxii

⁴ For a discussion of the various forms of individualism see *op cit*, Stevenson Moessner, "A New Pastoral Paradigm," 205. These terms as they are used in *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, Robert Bellah et al., are presented

⁵ Diogenes Allen, *Love: Christian Romance, Marriage, Friendship* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1987), 12

⁶ J. R. Jones, "Love as Perception of Meaning," *Religion and Understanding* (New York: MacMillan, 1967), 149-50, quoted in Allen, *ibid*

⁷ Allen, *op cit*, 21

⁸ Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Gospel According to Luke*, International Critical Commentaries (New York: Chas. Scribner's Sons, 1989), 289

⁹ David Tiede, *Luke*, Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1988), 210

¹⁰ David Moessner, *Lord of the Banquet* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 144

¹¹ Jeanne Stevenson Moessner, *op cit*, 203

¹² Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1982)

¹³ The Stone Center at Wellesley, MA, has published many articles and lectures on the developmental concept of the self-in-relation

¹⁴ Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Luke: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Third Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 126.