

Sermon Sparkler for the Third Sunday After Pentecost

One of the consistent themes in Luke (as well as its sequel Acts, which moves from Jerusalem to Samaria to Rome) is outsiders, and particularly Samaritans.

Just a brief reminder of what makes Samaritans outsiders, from Seeing with the Mind, Hearing with the Heart: A Thematic Bible Study on Luke by a Young Pastor and a Not So Young Parishioner:

“Here are two images to get you thinking about Samaritans.

- 1) Who do you fight with the most, your brother or the neighbor two blocks down? Your brother, clearly, because you are closer to him; he’s like you, but isn’t you.
- 2) There is a phenomena called “The Uncanny Valley” in which, at a certain point, the more human a robot gets, the less comfortable humans are with the robot.

Both of these realities, brother and robot, get to Judaism’s relationship to the Samaritans. They’re too close for comfort; they’re so close, yet “fake,” they’re Gentiles, yet followers of the law.

So, who are the Samaritans? According to 2 Kings 17, they were originally people from Babylon conquered by the Assyrians. The Assyrians had a particular method of conquest—they conquered a people, plucked them up from their land, and plunked them somewhere else that they had conquered, repopulating the then uninhabited land with other conquered peoples. Essentially they swapped conquered peoples. This policy makes a certain amount of sense—if you’re dropped off in a strange land you have to depend on the one thing you are familiar with, your captors, additionally, guerilla warfare is harder to do if you don’t know the best places to hide.

So, in this particular case, sometime after 722BCE Israel, the Northern Kingdom, is conquered and the 10 tribes are drug away and dispersed to other territories conquered by the Assyrians. Then, the Assyrians took peoples from Babylon and made them settle in what used to be Israel. As the story goes, these newcomers were having trouble adapting to the local fauna—by that, I mean they were getting eaten by lions. So they made a very practical choice. They converted to the faith of the land, so that the god of the land would stop harassing them with a feline welcome wagon.

As time goes on, the Samaritans adopt a modified version of the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, but not the later books, especially those written while the Judean elite were captured in Babylon. Fast forward five to seven centuries, and you have these “foreigners” living alongside the Jews, who have their own customs, place of worship, and a condensed scripture to which they claim the Jews added. As you can imagine this is a recipe for ill will. And into this breach, steps Jesus, interacting with folk who it is unacceptable to interact with.

Her is one final note on Samaritans; in the famed science fiction author Isaac Asimov’s commentary on the Parable of the Good Samaritan, he explicitly encourages us to read the parable in light of American race relations; he’s not wrong. In fact, pushing it a little bit, imagine a people taken from their native land, adopting the religion of their surroundings for the sake of their safety, and hundreds of years later they’re still treated as other and as second-class citizens.”

In today’s Gospel James and John experience the jagged nature of reaching out to those different than you... sometimes they don’t want to be reached. And when that is the case we need to shake it off, instead of getting angry... after all, if you are reaching out to someone about good news, torching their village doesn’t really get the message across. Also, it is worth noting the reason Jesus is rejected here is that the Samaritans believe Mt. Gerizim, not Jerusalem, is the holy mountain. At any rate, today could be a good day to set up Samaritans for the congregation, in two weeks time you can point back to this incident when Jesus describes the Good Samaritan.

- 👉 Who may seem like a Samaritan to your community?
- 👉 How can we practice shaking off rejection as communities of faith who wish to witness to that faith?
- 👉 How are you going to set up the Good Samaritan Parable with today’s sermon?