

Advent Lutheran Church
Loving God and Loving Neighbor
March 12, 2025
Luke 10:25-42

I remember a time when a lot of people were talking about a church sign.

I'm not referencing the fact that Advent's church sign went dark earlier this week and is now awaiting a repair. Although now, you'll likely notice that and begin talking about it.

Instead, I'm thinking about a church sign that proclaimed a concise and controversial message: "The Good Hamas Member."

Members of that congregation were talking about it. And, since the church was located on a busy road, many people beyond the church noticed the message. It sparked considerable conversation in the wider community.

That week's four-word message perhaps drew more attention than the next forty updates. Ask me how I know . . . I was the interim pastor who wrote the copy and instructed a staff member to post it.

Why would I do such a thing? That Sunday, I was preaching on the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Just a few months earlier one of the most respected New Testament scholars of our time, Dr. Amy-Jill Levine, had published a new book titled *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*. She ended the chapter on the Parable of the Good Samaritan with her own modern version titled, "The Parable of the Good Hamas Member."¹

Dr. Levine replaced each of the three main characters with twenty-first century characters. Instead of ending with a Samaritan she opts for a Palestinian Muslim whose sympathies lie with Hamas.²

Even now, a decade later, her version of the parable is hard to hear. And that is important.

¹ Amy-Jill Levine. *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*. (HarperOne, 2015)

² *Ibid.*, p.105.

But first, let me address the entirety of this morning's Gospel reading. If you have been in church most of your life, then you've likely heard many sermons on the Good Samaritan and more than a few sermons on Martha and Mary.

However, it's likely you have never heard a sermon featuring both stories. We are attempting this today not because your preacher enjoys challenges, but rather because the Narrative Lectionary – the new lectionary we have been using – puts them together.

The Rev. Dr. Peter Choi is a pastor and professor who serves as the convener of the Preaching Justice Fellowship.³ He explains:

What are these stories doing together? The story of the good Samaritan and the story of Martha and Mary make for an unlikely pairing. And yet there they are in Luke's gospel, one after the other . . . In these stories, Jesus shows us a way of love that defies conventions and transgresses boundaries.⁴

Rather than invite you into a scholarly inquiry, I'm suggesting that together these stories should frame our Lenten journey. Today's challenge is the greatest one of all.

It all begins with a lawyer doing what lawyer's do best: asking hard questions.

His first question is straightforward because it is a set up for the next question. He asks Jesus, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"⁵

Jesus takes the bait and answers directly. Well . . . as directly as Jesus ever does. He answers the question by asking a question of his own: "What is written in the law?"⁶

The lawyer is a bit irritated but gives Jesus a Sunday school reply, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul

³ I'm currently a Preaching Justice Fellow. See Preaching Justice: A Community & A Lifeline, February 12, 2025 - <https://sowhatfaith.com/2025/02/12/preaching-justice-a-lifeline/>

⁴ Peter Choi. Luke 10:25-42: A Transgressing Love, a Conversation Starter posted in the Faith & Justice Online Community - <https://community.faithjustice.net/> - on March 7, 2025.

⁵ Luke 10:25

⁶ Luke 10:26

and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' "⁷

And, finally, after hearing Jesus' validation he's ready to pose the question he's wanted to ask all along, "How little must I do to be counted as someone who keeps the law?" Or, we might ask, "Jesus, what are the minimum requirements to be counted as one of your disciples?"

Jesus answers the harder question with a story – a specific kind of story called a parable. These are everyday stories that usually include a surprise turn that points us toward God's Empire and away from all other empires.

Here we have a man traveling in a dangerous area who ends up becoming the victim of an assault. He's beaten, robbed, and presumably left to die on the side of the road. He's holding out hope that someone will stop to rescue him.

First, a priest comes by. Surely a pastor will step in to help. Except he doesn't. There are many possible reasons he doesn't stop to help, but that doesn't matter right now.

Second, a Levite passes by. Surely a religious leader will do the right thing. Except he doesn't. Once more we don't know his rationale, but we can imagine that he never slowed down.

Finally, a third person approaches the scene. The astute listener to storytelling Jesus is likely aware that the third man's arrival will bring the twist in the story, illuminating the parable's main point.

The third person is a Samaritan, or if you prefer, the Hamas Member, or fill in the name of this character with whatever person you find hard to love. Maybe it is a person affiliated with the other American political party. Or perhaps it is someone you have a long history with and now refer to as your enemy.

Jesus tells us that on our worst day when everything that could go wrong has gone wrong and when we are afraid that we have come

⁷ Luke 10:27

to the end of this life, we ought to imagine receiving help from the last person on earth that we'd normally interact with.

And then the passage concludes with Jesus asking the lawyer to draw a conclusion. "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"⁸

The lawyer who thought he was setting up Jesus now realizes Jesus set him up and concedes that it was the Samaritan. The despised other was the one who acted as a true neighbor.

Jesus agrees and tells the man to go and do likewise.⁹

Story #1 ends with our first challenge: Love your neighbor.

Whenever you think you are doing this exceedingly well remind yourself that Jesus teaches that everyone is your neighbor – even those you don't know and those you don't like.

And if this isn't challenging enough, we have a second story. It is a story of two sisters who welcome Jesus into their home. As nice as it is to entertain him, they cannot agree on the best approach.

Martha chooses to be an attentive hostess providing for the needs of all of her guests and following the etiquette of her day. Mary avoids these traditional tasks to be fully present with Jesus.

And, if we fast forward, we find out that this story also has a surprise ending: Mary, the one who foregoes the expected duties, is praised. Jesus ends this teaching by saying, "Mary has chosen what is better."¹⁰

If you are left asking, "what did I miss?" you are not alone.

Placing this story in context we remember it is paired with the Good Samaritan story – a story that begins with an assertion that being a person of faith is all about loving God and loving neighbor.

⁸ Luke 10:36

⁹ Luke 10:37

¹⁰ Luke 10:42

One of the lessons the Mary and Martha story is teaching us is the importance of loving God. Mary has chosen to ignore cultural norms and to forgo her sister's requests. She does this to sit at Jesus' feet and to learn all she can from him.

Story #2 provides our second challenge: Love God.

A few days ago, on Ash Wednesday, we were invited to count the cost and to commit or recommit to following the Way of Jesus. And now we are being reminded we can only do this when we wholeheartedly and single-mindedly love God.

While each of our two stories features an exemplar it is worth noting the other characters are good people. We know that priests and Levites loved God, but in this single episode of their lives they fell short of loving their neighbor. And, we know that Martha loves neighbor as evidenced by her hospitality, but during Jesus' visit she fell short of loving God.

The first story features an all-male cast of characters while the second has women in all of the leading roles. The first story praises bold action while the second teaches us the importance of slowing down.

In both cases – actually in every case – it's all about love.

Elsewhere in Scripture we know Jesus says that we can boil down the 613 laws found in the Old Testament to two: love God and love neighbor.¹¹

In today's stories Jesus illustrates how to love. Now it is our turn to respond by living loving lives.

Amen.

¹¹ Matthew 22:36-40