

## Carrying the Light: When We Can See a Samaritan and Shepherds in God's Eyes

Luke 2:1-20 and Luke 10:29-37

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Jesus was plus-or-minus thirty years old when a religious person referenced the teaching from Leviticus 19:18 and asked Jesus how he – as a religious person – could know who was the neighbor whom God allegedly wants us to love as ourself (Luke 10:29). To reply and to assist the religious person with an example, Jesus told the parable of the man from Jerusalem who walked toward Jericho, was attacked, beaten, robbed, and left along the roadside. Two religious persons passed by and kept going because their religious faith considered the man's bloody condition required more of their time for follow-up purification than they had time to give. Then along comes a man from the north – from Samaria. The southern religious people particularly resented the northern Samaritans. Yet who stopped to render aid to the man from Jerusalem who'd been passed by two others who lived in and around Jerusalem? The one who stopped to give aid was the resented northerner.

Let's say that one conclusion of adult Jesus telling that parable, which is often called the parable of "the Good Samaritan," is a conclusion which goes like this: "Those who arrive with respect and care may not be the ones expected, but they may be the ones God has sent."

About twenty years ago, the Foote family was driving down the road in our minivan, mom and dad in the front, eleven year old Kendall in one backseat and six year old Payton in the other. Kendall began talking about a situation at school where three boys who wore clothes of "GAP," "Abercrombie & Fitch," and "American Eagle" brands were teasing and ridiculing another boy whose clothes were not of the cost-level or style-reputation of their own. Kendall gave his opinion that their comments were unfair, excluding, and cruel. He said something like, "I wonder what Javier can do to make them shut up?" There was silence for a few seconds. Either Joanie or I said, "Well, don't you think that – in God's eyes – those three boys are valued by God as much as Javier and you are valued?" More silence. Then Kendall said, "In God's eyes, maybe."

Kendall's reluctant conclusion instantly became a mantra in our household describing the difference between what God expects and desires and the attitudes we instinctively prefer to practice. Might we realize anew how both (1) the parable of the Samaritan aiding the man beaten and robbed on the way to Jericho and (2) the scene remembered tonight at Bethlehem include events with the possibility of giving each of us and all of us new attitudes and, thereby, new relationships, as God draws near in God's preferred way, which, in all likelihood, is not the way we'd choose? None of the Foote family was excusing the cruel ridicule of a group of 6<sup>th</sup> grade, fashion-conscious boys. We were attempting, though, not to fall into a "you-boys-deserve-worse-for-your-snobbish-attitude" outlook ourselves. God certainly was and is capable of giving them new eyes for faith in life as they related to Javier and others, and new eyes for faith in understanding themselves as part of God's large family. Don't we all need to recall the prophet's words: "Thus says the Lord, 'My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways'" (Isaiah 55:8)?

More than once in Scripture the ones who arrive with respect and care are not the ones we expect, but they are the ones God sends. That's absolutely the case in the story of that first Christmas's early hours. Shepherds from the fields find their way into town to pay respect and offer care to a babe born in a garage or stable because there was no hotel room and no accredited midwifery or hospital available. To the eyes of many looking at the situation then and there,

nothing about the setting indicated God's blessing, except maybe that a baby's birth occurred without serious negative developments. At least there was that; but certainly nothing indicated God was especially blessing Bethlehem or the empire of Rome or the world and universe beyond the boundaries of Rome's Mediterranean and European Empire. Then here come shepherds – who have not showered in days, who have left their flocks possibly understaffed or deserted completely – we're not told. We are told that those who arrive with respect and care – while they may not be ones we expected, they may be ones God has sent.

In God's eyes, the Samaritan of Jesus' parable is the very one whom Jesus intends will catch the attention of his so-called religious hearers, and possibly take their breath away, so shocking and revolting is the thought that God has sent him – and that he is the one who demonstrates the heart and compassion of what God expects: "You shall love your neighbor (everyone!) as yourself."

In God's eyes, the shepherds of Jesus' birth story represent outsiders invited, prompted, encouraged, and welcomed into the stable-nursery-area to kneel before the infant promised of God with the woman who birthed him and the man caring for him, who has been born in circumstances which offend anyone with a sense of propriety and cultural tradition. God goes slumming, whether religious and high society folks like it or not. In God's eyes, some things are more important than popular brands, accredited birth centers, and exclusive religious traditions.

Friends, if God in Jesus is believed as compelling and authentic, God is pleading with all people – including you and me – extending an invitation to every member of God's family for seeing deeper – not deeper only within ourselves personally, but also deeper within life as God is willing to come to us in ways different from our preferred expectations and outlooks. God here invites us to be bearers and carriers of the light of God's love – which creates awe, wonder, and abiding respect in relation to every person! With God's help again tonight and in every day ahead, may we be among those who bear and carry the light of God's love because we increasingly sense how "those who arrive with respect and care may not be the ones we expected, but they may be ones God has sent." This story and this reality include us as those who, however different from each other, in God's eyes are members together of the much wider family of God's people. – Glory be to God in the highest and, on earth, God's peace among all!