

When Lawyers Hear Stories
Sunday, March 31, 2019
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ms. Anne Robertson

Text: *Luke 10:25-37*

As you may have guessed from the meditation, first reading, and title of this sermon, the theme for this morning is the importance of stories. I understand you have been looking at a number of the parables in the Bible, so I want to say a bit about stories in general and then use that framework to look at the parable of the Good Samaritan—not just for its content, but for the way the use of a story changes the dynamic between Jesus and the lawyer who questions him.

To look at stories, let's go all the way back to the meditation at the beginning of the service. It's a quote from *The Secret Life of Bees* by Sue Monk Kidd, and it's also the opening quote in my new book, *New Vision for an Old Story*. "Stories have to be told or they die, and when they die, we can't remember who we are or why we're here." When I'm using the word story in this context or when it's used in the quotes we've used this morning, it's not equating story with fiction or even literature in general. It's expressing that that stories are the fundamental building blocks of human relationship, community, and identity—who we are and why we're here.

We all build our lives and our relationships by exchanging stories. You probably did some of that when you first came here this morning. Maybe you saw someone you know and did some catching up: How was your week? Did you hear back from your granddaughter? Did you get that conflict resolved at work? Are you feeling better? Or maybe you saw someone you didn't know: I don't think I know you. Have you been here before? What brought you here? Do you live in Scituate?

All of those questions are invitations either to begin or to deepen a relationship. They're openings to exchange and share the stories of our lives, which is the fundamental way that human beings build community. Stories are also the way we understand who we are. That's why all the ancestral DNA tests are so popular. We want more of our story—the stories of our ancestors, the family stories that no one is alive to tell us that might help explain why I live where I do or why our family has the values that it does.

It's one of the wounds that the scourge of slavery has inflicted on the Black descendants of slaves in America. Slaves were stripped not just of their homes and

their clothes and their names and their freedom, but of the ancestral stories of who they were, what they believed about themselves, and where they came from. It was the same for Native Americans as my ancestors tried to obliterate their language, culture, names, religion, and stories so that they would forget who they were and what made each tribe unique and special. In both cases my ancestors subjugated a people, took their stories, and substituted a story that would encourage them to accept the place where we put them. And even today we shamefully fight any efforts to give them back.

As that national shame illustrates, stories can be a two-edged sword. The stories that shape our families, churches, and communities aren't necessarily helpful, and a lot of both justice work and personal therapy involves looking at the stories around which we've built our lives and learning which ones help us and which ones might hurt our ability to live life to its fullest. Which brings us to that complex and controversial set of stories called the Bible.

The thing we misunderstand most frequently about the Bible is that it, too, is fundamentally story. It isn't law, although its stories tell us about a whole pile of laws. It isn't a textbook of facts, although its stories contain people and places and events that can be identified as factual. The Bible is a compendium of ancient stories about a particular people who believed in a particular God and about where that journey took them over approximately four thousand years. It's a story about who they were and what purpose they found in their faith that is shared—as all stories are—as an invitation for us to join in the story to find out the same for ourselves.

When I say that the Bible, like human life, is fundamentally story, I'm not making any claims about fact or fiction. What I'm saying is that reading the Bible to try to discern fact from fiction is missing the point. Reading the Bible to pull out laws for this and that is missing the point. The Bible is an invitation to relationship with the characters we read about. We are invited to put ourselves into its stories, just as we do when we enter a movie theater or read a book. Whether that book is about Frodo Baggins or Abraham Lincoln is beside the point. We put ourselves into the shoes of the characters to discover what we might learn about ourselves and our world by experiencing the people in the story as they learn about themselves and their world.

That's what the Bible gives us—an invitation to engage, up close and personal, not to see if the facts are right, not to see how we might judge others for doing it wrong, but to see if looking at the world through the eyes of an ancient

people who tried and often failed to live out their faith might give us some wisdom and guidance for our own journey. Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan shows us exactly how that kind of approach can shift a religious discussion away from an unhelpful parsing of legal language to getting to the core of moral teaching. So let's go back to Luke to see how that works.

Jesus tells this parable in response to a very specific question by a lawyer who is looking for a gotcha moment with Jesus. It's described as a test. The Greek word for lawyer here means one who is versed in the Law of Moses, so we're not talking about a secular attorney in the way we would know it. This is someone who specializes in religious law. The lawyer asks, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus instantly gets that this is not a sincere question and turns it back on the man. You tell me, Jesus basically says to him. If you're a lawyer worth your salt, you know the answer.

And Jesus was right. The lawyer doesn't miss a beat: "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." You might recognize that as what Christians have come to call the Great Commandment, but Jesus didn't make that up. The lawyer isn't quoting Jesus when he gives that answer; he's quoting two passages from the Hebrew Scriptures, the part about loving God with all you've got is from Deuteronomy 6:5 and the "love your neighbor as yourself" part is from Leviticus 19:18. The great rabbis of the age had already determined that those things together summed up the Law of Moses and this lawyer knew it.

Jesus confirms that the lawyer has given the right answer. Which is its own kind of genius. The guy came to test Jesus and ends up with Jesus grading the test. But you can almost see Jesus looking at the guy as if to say, "Now that we've gotten that out of the way, why are you really here? What's your real question?" The lawyer doesn't disappoint. The real question is what comes next. "Who is my neighbor?" The lawyer is looking at his faith through a legal lens. He sees "Love your neighbor" as a law, so he wants to parse that out and see if there isn't some kind of loophole. Because surely "neighbor" can't mean just anybody, right? We need to define our terms.

Jesus isn't having any of that either. He doesn't get sucked into an academic debate about who is and isn't a neighbor. Instead, Jesus launches into a story about a guy who gets mugged by robbers and left for half dead and the three people who encounter the wounded man on the road. Two are religious leaders who do nothing,

even crossing the road to avoid the dilemma. The one who does the right thing is a Samaritan.

Ouch. There's a complex history behind the animosity, but suffice it to say that the Samaritans and Jews were physical neighbors with some common ancestry but who bore a deep-seated hatred of one another. Making a Samaritan the hero of a story told to a Jewish audience must have stung, but there was no debating the point. Again Jesus turns the question back on the lawyer. "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" The man responds with the obvious: "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus then finishes up with the instruction, "Go and do likewise."

In saying that, Jesus turned the question around in yet another way. The lawyer came wanting to know who he was allowed to exclude under the "love your neighbor" clause—who was a neighbor and who wasn't. But Jesus reframed the question. By the end, it was no longer about the man's ability to identify who was a neighbor to him; it was about his own willingness to be a neighbor to others. The lawyer has no further questions. Because it's obvious.

The man came to have an academic debate about the law. But what he gets is a story that destroys the relevance of his question. The answer is plain and, instead of a gotcha victory over Jesus, the lawyer now has to go home and think about which of those three men he himself would be. He's a teacher of the law, but has he ever really considered what it's like to live it? Maybe love of God IS love of neighbor. Maybe loving our neighbors is how love of God is expressed in the world.

When presented with the Bible, almost all of us are that lawyer. We bring our suspicions and our criticisms and our understandings of science and proof and law and march up to Jesus to make our point with a clever question. And, like the lawyer, often we know the answer before we ask. We can quote chapter and verse. Well, what do you say to that? Look at how vague that is. Look at how contradictory these passages are. Look at how silly it sounds to say the earth was made in seven days. Look at how cruel this supposed hero is. You call this good and righteous and holy?

The Bible doesn't worry about those questions, much as we would like it to. Like Jesus, it just opens the car door when the first dawn breaks and asks if we are willing to get in and travel the road from dawn to dark and back again and think about what that journey has to teach us. As we travel the Bible through creation and war, sin and forgiveness, sacrifice and grace, we understand the message. We

stop using it to judge the behavior of others and start using it to ask questions of ourselves. We stop arguing about what did or didn't happen and start thinking about what the faith journey of those people might have to teach us about our own. Like Jesus, it answers our legal questions with a story about a man beaten, robbed and lying wounded in a ditch and asks if we'd like to stop the car and get out to help or if would we rather just drive on by.

And however we answer, our questions are turned back on our lawyerly selves. Who was the neighbor to the man who was robbed? Once we've entered the story, it's obvious. It's not about what we think; it's about how we live. God doesn't care if we're following the orthodoxy of our faith or if we're a heretic Samaritan with a statue of Zeus in our temple. The one who shows mercy gets it right. Do this, says Jesus, and you will live. The story, says Sue Monk Kidd, shows us who we are. Amen.