

Volume 31.1 2012

Africa
Journal
of Evangelical
Theology

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ISSN 1026-2946

Who is the Neighbour?

An Application of Luke 10:30-37 to the HIV and AIDS Crisis

A Morning Devotional by Samuel M. Ngewa, Africa International University

The story we have in Luke 10:30-37 was told by Jesus in a literary genre we call “parable” (*parabolē*). A parable is a story told alongside a point one would like to communicate to those who are listening to the story. It may be based on facts or real happenings or just possible happenings within a particular context. During Jesus’ time, mention of a Priest, Levite, and Samaritan would trigger something in the minds of the hearers. The hearers related to the parable because these were characters familiar to them. If it was being told for the first time today, Jesus would probably have used such terms as “a Bishop”, “a Reverend”, “a Pastor” or similar terms in place of the Priest and the Levite. In the place of the Samaritan he could have used a prostitute, an outcast or such other categories of persons in our societies.

The point Jesus was telling the story against is a question asked by a lawyer (Luke 9:25) and the question was, “*And who is my neighbour?*” (Luke 10:29). Luke tells us that this lawyer asked this question “*to justify himself*” (9:29). The question seems very sincere and so one wonders why Luke would make this statement of judgment that the lawyer was not asking in sincerity but in order to justify himself. The act of “justifying self” has the idea of, “I am OK”, or “I have done well”. The lawyer thought he was doing very well.

Before we examine our passage more closely however, let me tell you a true story; and I would like to underline the word true. It actually happened in our times.

A certain old African lady in a God-fearing church was asked to pray during the Sunday morning worship service. She was asked to do so because she had always prayed good prayers – relevantly mentioning the needs of the people around her. This particular Sunday, however, she added in her prayer, the following words: “Lord, we also pray for those with *ukimwi* [she did not know such terms as HIV/AIDs], touch them Lord, and heal them.” After the service, the well trained pastor rebuked her for her prayer of that day. She was caught unaware by this because she had prayed many times before with very good response. The well trained pastor pointed out that her sin of that day was that she asked God to heal the persons with *ukimwi*. He then went on to say, “To pray for such is to compromise the holiness of God because those with *ukimwi* belong to the class of adulterers and fornicators.” The poor woman went home feeling bad that she had made her holy pastor unhappy (without intending to do so) and the holy pastor went home feeling well satisfied with his excellent ministry of the day – even rebuking an old lady who in her prayer wanted to bring those with *ukimwi* near God for His touch.

This is a true story telling us the attitude of a pastor in the 21st century. Let us go back to our passage from Luke 10 and examine the characters in the parable carefully.

Character One: A Certain Man

This man can be any of us - our brother or our sister. He certainly had a name (or could be given one), but that did not matter. He could be Kariuki, Odhiambo, Kimutai, Mutiso, Elizabeth, etc, but that does not matter. What matters is what he represents. He is a human being in need.

He was on his journey from Jerusalem to Jericho for some unknown reason. What we know for sure is that this was a dangerous road, and perhaps Jesus picked it specifically for that reason. Some of those who apply allegory to the parable say that he was travelling from the holy city of Jerusalem to the unholy city of Jericho. This could well be, but it is not necessary for understanding the story. Simply, he was on a journey. Relating this to us today, he was going about his daily business in life. As he went on his way:

1. *He fell among robbers* (10:30). Those who have had the experience of being at the mercy of robbers can identify with this. Robbers want to take everything good you have, and do not mind taking your life if you stand in their way. The virus (HIV/AIDS) we are talking about this week has no other goal in the body of the victim but to rob him or her of the good God-given things in the body. It wants to destroy them so that the victim is left with nothing to resist diseases, whether simple or major. It wants to rob and leave the door open for whatever germs want to get in to do so with ease. I do not want to interrupt our thoughts, but there were some robbers who after taking away everything their victim had, threw back some little money to him and said, "Get that for your fare". I remember when I was told this, my first words were: "Those were good thieves". By this, I meant that they were thieves whose consciences were still active to some degree. The HIV/AIDS virus does not have that kind of mercy.

2. *The robbers "stripped him" and "beat him"* (10:30) – leaving him with wounds (10:34). The only thing between him and death was "half life". Jesus used the phrase, "*went off leaving him half dead*". We can imagine how helpless this man was, and also how he had become a "no touch" human being to some people.

Character Two: A Certain Priest

This priest was given an opportunity to see this "robbed and beaten up" man. He happened to be going that way. There may have been other victims elsewhere this priest did not see but this particular one, "he saw". It was an opportunity for action. His response: "*he passed by on the other side*". It was not his business.

Who is the priest? He is the one who brings the voice of God to the people and takes the needs of the people to God. He was the one who represented

the people's religious affairs at the highest levels. What was his response? It is not my business, at least that is the way he acted. Why? I have heard some preachers suggest he may have been in a hurry to go and offer sacrifice, or he may have thought the person was dead and did not want to pollute himself by touching a dead body. These are all possibilities. The key point for Jesus' however, was "he lacked love for the victim". He did not act as a neighbour to the man in need. For whatever reason, that was his attitude. He lacked compassion. Let us for a moment reflect on the possibilities of how this attitude might be found in us.

Firstly, it is very likely that we have been in a hurry to do some ministry somewhere. Ministry to whom? Our ministry is to the people in need. This does not mean we will allow ourselves to be sidetracked by every little thing that comes our way. However, a man left half-dead and with no one else around is not a little thing. What things keep us so busy that we act towards people affected by HIV and AIDS in the same way as the Priest did?

Secondly, being afraid of touching a dead body and being polluted by that touch is frighteningly similar to the fear of touching a person affected by HIV or AIDS. This is being so holy that we cannot fit into Jesus' team, for he allowed a sinful woman to wash his feet (Luke 7:36-38), and he was not afraid to touch lepers (Luke 5:13).

Character Three: A Levite

He followed the *nyayo* (Kiswahili for "footsteps") of the priest. In our day, a Levite would be like the elders/deacons, and the priest could be likened to the pastor. These are the *mheshimiwas* (Kiswahili for "honourable persons") in the local churches. Just like the priest, the Levite "saw" and then "passed by on the other side". His attitude too was, "It is not my business".

Character Four: A Certain Samaritan

Let us consider certain facts about this Samaritan.

1. He was a despised Samaritan. He was not a person of high religious class as the Priest and the Levite were.
2. He was on a journey (10:33). In other words, he had business to attend to. He was not less busy than the Priest and the Levite.
3. He saw the man and had compassion. Compassion is "being moved by mercy". I believe that the greatest sin committed by the Priest and the Levite was their lack of compassion.
4. He came to the robbery victim, bandaged his wounds, poured oil and wine on them, put him on his own beast, brought him to an inn and took care of him. From this we note:
 - a) He got himself involved. He did not stay aloof.
 - b) He attended to the wounds of the beaten up person. What considerations do we make when we are saving persons who are bleeding to death? If we have no gloves that we need to protect us against possible

HIV transmission, do we stay uninvolved or do we have compassion and see a life that must be saved?

c) He spent his own resources for first aid. What about a church budget that includes provision for anti-viral drugs for those who can't afford them?

d) He sacrificed his comfort for the sake of the victim.

e) He looked for a place he could get further help for the victim – and met the expense, in full. This is like taking someone to Nairobi hospital and signing the documents guaranteeing payment for the patient's treatment.

Jesus' question to the lawyer was, "Which of these three: the Priest, the Levite, or the Samaritan (that is, **the pastor, the deacon** or the **outcast**) received the verdict of 'well-done' from God?"

The lawyer could not bring himself to saying, "the Samaritan", instead he said, "*the one who showed mercy toward him*" but from the context, he was certainly referring to the Samaritan. What if the despised classes of people are more compassionate than us, even if we do not want to call them by their names? Those who have no high social class but who do have compassion for people affected by HIV and AIDS have surpassed the "reverends" and the "pastors" who do nothing. *It is not the title but the act that matters before God.*

Through this parable the lawyer came to know from Jesus that, "*His neighbour is the human being, whoever he may be, with whom God brings him into contact, and who has need for his help*".¹ With this understanding, Jesus told him, "*Go and do like wise*" – that is, act as the Samaritan did. I like the way the Greek puts it: "Go and *σὺ ποιεῖς* (you yourself do) likewise". There is emphasis here, "you yourself". Ministry to people affected by HIV and AIDS is something we cannot leave with the Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), the government, or someone else. We must be personally involved in it, if we are obedient to Jesus' words.

Please, allow me to submit that at the Second Coming many will say to Jesus, "Don't you remember, I was reverend so and so, etc" and Jesus' reply will be, "That is good, but what did you do with the needy: the widows, the orphans, the people affected by HIV and AIDS?"

I want to be one of those to whom Jesus will say, "You acted like the Samaritan and I am pleased with you". What are some practical ways to act like a modern day Good Samaritan?

1. *Make no judgment.* None of us knows how anyone got to have HIV status. Even if we can guess in the case of some, we did not see the virus as it entered into their bodies.

¹ F. Godet, *A Commentary on the Gospel of St. Luke*, 2 vols., Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1888-1889, p. 41 of Vol. 2.

2. *Make our first response “compassion” and not condemnation.* Deliberately explore ways of supporting those who are victims. Prayer is something we all can afford. Helping financially would be an excellent act.

3. *Educate our members to be like Jesus, and his approved character – the Samaritan.* That is, encourage and train persons who will respond to the needs of others with no strings attached.

4. *Preach a life of holiness for we know that some of the infections have been spread through sexual acts outside marriage.* Purity of life cannot be compromised even as we are moved with compassion. Our promotion of purity, however, must go alongside the love of Christ. He loved us when we were unlovable. Who are we to deny anyone such love?

In conclusion, Jesus told the lawyer, “Go, and you yourself do likewise”. May the Lord increase those of us who heed these words!