25 Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”
26 He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?”
27 He answered, “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.”
28 And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”
29 But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”
30 Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead.
31 Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.
32 So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.
33 But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity.
34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him.
35 The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’
36 Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?”
37 He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

This parable is told to a Jewish lawyer who asked what he must do to inherit eternal life. Interesting question. What kind of life do I have to live here in order to live forever?

Jesus asked what was in the law concerning this, and the lawyer quotes Deuteronomy 6:5; “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your
soul, and with all your might.” He also quotes Leviticus 19:18; and “...you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

And Jesus agrees. Love is the highest moral good. So he says, “Do this and you will live.” Sounds easy! But then the lawyer asked, “Who is my neighbor?” Hang onto that question, “Who is my neighbor?”

Jesus makes up this little story about a nameless person who was beaten and robbed on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. That’s a real road, running 18 miles from south to northeast, descending from 2,474 ft. above sea level to 902 ft. below sea level. That’s steep! It was probably the most dangerous road in all of Israel. Everybody would have known that, and that’s probably why Jesus chose it.

He has a priest and a Levite both pass by this wounded fellow and offer him no help. These are the religious guys, the ones you would expect to help, but they don’t. They could have been Presbyterians! (But the guy would have died because the Presbyterians would have had six committee meetings before they did anything!) For whatever reason, these religious types don’t stop. So, Jesus is making a point.

There’s plenty of times I don’t stop. Someone is broken down on the side of the road, I don’t stop. Could be a trick. They probably have a cell phone, so they can call a wrecker. Too dangerous. I’ve already passed them and can’t turn around! (Good excuse!)

Then there’s the people at every intersection in the city, begging for change. They catch you at the red-light. Don’t make eye contact. Don’t roll down the window. I can’t give money out at every intersection, every day. Besides, it’s probably a scam. Should be against the law! Come on light, hurry up and change!

What are we supposed to do? Is helping strangers the way to inherit eternal life? Is that what Jesus is saying? “Be a good Samaritan?” That sounds like works righteousness. I can earn my way into heaven? That can’t be it.

Richard Watts raised an interesting point. It’d be one thing to help this guy on Monday, but what if you had to travel that road every day? There’s another beaten victim on Tuesday, and Wednesday, and Thursday, and Friday. Sooner or later you would need to address the issue of the robbers in the woods! What is it that is beating people up and robbing them of the quality of life in this world? (Richard Watts, “The Good Samaritan”, Presbyterian Survey, June 1988, pp.162-165)

Interesting question, but not the focus of this parable.

The key to this story is actually in the word Samaritan. Jesus intentionally chooses the Samaritan to stop, take pity, bandage the beaten man’s wounds and carry
him to an inn and take care of him. Not only that, but he pays for the innkeeper to continue to care for this man. So why choose a Samaritan?

Here’s the rub. Jews hated Samaritans! Samaritans hated Jews! It was an intense and long-standing hate.

Think of it as the hatred between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, or the hatred between street gangs in Los Angeles. It would be like the hate between slaves and slaveowners in America, or between Al Queda and the United States. Jews and Samaritans were in that category.

You have to understand hate to understand this parable. Hate between races. Hate between nations. Hate between political parties. We know about hate. It’s a toxic disease that feeds upon human insecurity, ignorance and pride and it can live for a very long time.

This dispute between the Jews and the Samaritans went back as far as 700 years before Christ. The Jews were conquered and the leadership was taken into exile. The Samaritans, a mixture of Jews and other races, stayed behind and basically assumed a Jewish identity. When the Jews were released and returned, it was like the three bears coming home and finding Goldilocks sleeping in their bed! That’s the short version!

Dr. Amy Jill-Levine, Professor of New Testament and Jewish Studies at Vanderbilt Divinity School, summarizes the conflict this way;

Each claimed the true descent from Abraham, true understanding of Torah, the correct priesthood, and the right form of worship at the proper location. (Levine, Short Stories by Jesus. Harper One.2014. p. 106)

They both can’t be right. From the Jewish standpoint, the Samaritans were imposters. From the Samaritan viewpoint, they were the rightful heirs. It was religious, and it was political. There was no compromise, no debate, no crossing the isle. It was a stalemate, for hundreds of years!

What is it about hate that is so attractive? Does it justify us in some way? “If you are wrong, then I must be right?” Does it distance us from those who threaten us? “If I hate you, then I’m not like you.” But maybe you are. We often hate the things in others that we are unwilling to see in ourselves. It’s called “projection.”

People feed on hate. It’s like an addiction. We cluster around people who hate with us. Maybe that exonerates us, or it makes us feel like we belong. Gangs feed off the need for family and belonging. The hate is a glue. The end justifies the means. Or does it?
What is it about “blind hate,” when we are not able, or willing, to see the other person for who they really are, or who they could be? Hate diminishes human worth. I can’t see any good in you. That’s what Jesus is dealing with here.

So, in the end, Jesus asked a question. “Which of these three (the priest, the Levite or the Samaritan) do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” And did you notice the lawyer’s answer? He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” He couldn’t even say the word, “Samaritan!” And Jesus said, “Go and do likewise.”

“So, you want me to go and be like a Samaritan?” “No, I want you to see the good, even in those you hate.”

You could write all this off as being too liberal, if it weren’t for Jesus. He’s the one who made up this little story. We’re the ones who reduced it to bandaging those who are wounded in life. Do we really want to ask, “Who is my neighbor?” The answer changes the world! We would have to see the good in our Samaritan, the one we hate.

Let us pray. Teach us, O Lord, to move away from hate, discrimination, prejudice and pride. Open our hearts to one another as you have so graciously opened your heart to us. Empower us to live as if all people are indeed our neighbor. For your kingdom’s sake we pray. Amen.