
New Year. New Life.
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
January 2, 2022
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Luke 10:25-37

Happy New Year! You know, that phrase “Happy New Year” is such a celebratory expression. It suggests joy. It suggest great hopes for the coming year. But this year in particular, I’ve found that when I have said “Happy New Year” to people they have just looked at me funny. And I think I know why. It’s because right now, most of us are NOT particularly happy about our perception of our immediate future.

[image: looking backwards]

There are good reasons for that of course. With the rise of the fifth wave of covid, we are afraid of potential lockdowns. Already, access to Long Term Care homes has been restricted - again. And we’ve recently heard that the efficacy of 2 vaccine doses to prevent catching covid is now less than 15%. Are we heading back into some version of lockdown again? Who knows? But at this point everyone is worried that it will happen. There are lots of good reasons why people are not really excited about 2022. At least not yet.

How are you - yourself - feeling? Are you excited for a new year? Or are you withdrawn and hesitant because of many very reasonable concerns? Would you like me to just stop talking about this altogether and focus on the story of the Good Samaritan that we just read? A story that is familiar. A story that is comforting. A story that is comforting because as far as we know, nobody in the story had to wear a mask?

Well, you are in luck. I chose the reading we call the “Good Samaritan” because I do want to talk about it today. Because within the parable I believe are the seeds for how we can create a good 2022.

If that surprises you, perhaps it’s because we usually gloss over much of the parable when we hear it. We have heard the parable so many times that perhaps we don’t really hear it at all.

Let’s deal with the most common gloss first. The term “Good Samaritan” has

become synonymous with just helping someone in need. For example, Ontario has a “Good Samaritan” law that protects you legally if you provide first aid to a stranger. I realize that’s not a good legal description. But the important point is that “Samaritan” is simply seen as a random stranger. As another example, the Good Samaritan Society is all about helping anyone who needs help.

In our modern world, “Samaritan” is understood as simply a random stranger. But in the parable of the Good Samaritan one of the key points in the story is that Jewish people in Jesus’s day hated Samaritans. In the parable, a Jewish man is attacked. And then, a Jewish priest, and then a Jewish levite walk on past the wounded man. It is the Samaritan - a hated person - who reached out to help the wounded Jewish man.

Many scholars believe that the main point of the parable is to realize that your neighbour includes even your enemies. The story is not actually about helping people in need. Helping others is a great message of course. But it was not the point of the parable for Jesus. The parable is about breaking down the barrier between “one of us” and “not one of us”. Thinking that “Samaritan” means a random stranger is a common gloss over this parable. And I’m sure we’ve all heard that unpacked in countless sermons.

But here’s a less commonly understood gloss.

In the parable, we see a Samaritan helping a person simply because the person needed help. But did you ever ask yourself how difficult that might have been for the Samaritan? The Samaritan was walking down the road. Most people walking down a road have a reason to travel. Do we just assume that the Samaritan had lots of time to kill and nowhere else to be? What opportunities was the Samaritan missing by choosing to stop and help? Perhaps by stopping, he missed an important business meeting. Perhaps by stopping, he lost a new client. The Samaritan even stayed overnight and cared for the wounded person. And when the Samaritan left 2 coins with the inn keeper - was that because 2 coins was a reasonable amount? Or was that all the cash that the Samaritan had. Perhaps the Samaritan left all the money he had. Perhaps he had no real plan to get more money - even while offering to pay more when he returned. Perhaps the Samaritan gave away the money that he had planned to use to buy food to feed himself. Or maybe even his whole family.

[image: samaritan mlk]

And what about the inn keeper? Were they just a bystander here? Who says there was an empty room available? Perhaps the inn keeper gave the wounded man his own room and the inn keeper slept in the stable so that the wounded man could be accommodated. And who says that the inn keeper wanted to put up with a wounded guest who would need care and attention after the Samaritan left. Perhaps the inn keeper had other plans. And who says that the inn keeper had enough coin himself to invest in the wounded man's care right then and there - unasked - even with the dubious promise of more money in the future?

One gloss we usually apply to this parable is to imagine that it was convenient for the Samaritan and the inn keeper to care for the wounded man. We like to assume that when others help out, it must be convenient for them. We like to imagine that we only help others when it is convenient for us. We like to imagine that we can help others without actually impacting our own lives in negative ways.

Let's be honest. We like to help other people. But generally we want to help on our own terms. We want to help when we have time and resources that we do not have other plans for. And of course, we need to care for ourselves too ... we call it self-care. I'm not suggesting we should give everything we have away. But we gloss over the depth of the parable of the Good Samaritan if we imagine that helping the wounded man was convenient for the Samaritan and the inn keeper. Very likely, it was not.

Which brings us back to celebrating a new year.

As we face our second "covid new year", we are disappointed. We are disappointed because we can not gather as we want to. We are disappointed because meeting and eating are restricted - again. I'm very disappointed that it is now harder for me to get into LTC and hospitals to visit people. The situation is far from ideal.

[image: new year new attitude]

But where did we get the idea that conditions should be ideal anyway? That life should be convenient? That helping other people should always be convenient. We wait for "ideal conditions" to help other people, forgetting that life never works that way.

Reflect on the stories we have been reading and singing during Advent and

Christmas. Pregnant Mary has to ride on a donkey. The parents-to-be sleep in a stable. The magi take a long trip on smelly camels. Herod is not only a control freak, but he commits infanticide. The young family become refugees. The situation Jesus was born into was far from ideal.

And yet Jesus came into our midst anyway. The time and the place to engage with God is right here, and right now. As it has always been. That's what Advent is all about. Advent is not about waiting for the right time to find God in our midst. It's always the right time to find God in our midst. Covid be damned.

Besides, God doesn't usually show up in "ideal conditions" anyway. God usually shows up in the shadows of our lives. Who is this: Born in poverty. In a stable. A refugee as an infant. Living a life as an unemployed, homeless person. Ring any bells? Jesus was never about ideal conditions. Jesus was about the presence of God right in whatever mess he found himself in. Finding God in our midst today is about the presence of God right in whatever mess we find ourselves in too. Even during a pandemic. A Benedictine nun named Sister Ruth Marlene Fox wrote a blessing that reflects the messiness of life. It is called "A Non-traditional Blessing"¹.

A Non-traditional Blessing

- May God bless you with discomfort... Discomfort at easy answers, half-truths and superficial relationships, Discomfort, so that you will live deep within your heart.
- May God bless you with anger... Anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, Anger, so that you will work for justice, freedom, and peace.
- May God bless you with tears... Tears to shed for those who suffer pain, rejection, starvation and war, Tears, so that you will reach out to comfort them and turn their pain into joy.
- And, may God bless you with foolishness... Foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in this world, Foolishness, so that you will do what others claim cannot be done.

¹ <http://www.gingerling.co.uk/the-origin-of-a-franciscan-prayer-a-non-traditional-blessing/>

Perhaps the discomfort, anger, tears, and foolishness we feel heading into 2022 are blessings for us. Are those things blessings? Well, that's a trick question. Those things are blessings if we embrace them and learn from them.

It's a new year. Prepare for new life!

Amen.