

**“Tell Me A Story” Sermon Series:
What Do We Do With The Bible?/The Story of the Compassionate Samaritan
Luke 10: 25-37, Sermon by Tanya Pile
Fourth Sunday After the Epiphany**

Today we continue our Sermon Series: Tell Me A Story. We will discuss the origins of the Bible and it’s purpose in our lives. When we look closely, we see that the Bible has a variety of layers, like a parfait, or, dare I say it, a candy bar. The parable we just heard, is like a small bite of one of those layers. So, we will take a closer look.

Like Pastor Jenny, I have a stack of Bibles, too. You might ask why so many? I know Matt asks why we need another Bible in the house. I’m old enough that my 3rd grade Bible is a different translation from the one I received at Graduation. This is one of my copies of the KJV that I underlined and examined for literary devices for a class at Western, called Literature of the Bible. I have two Bibles from seminary. I thought maybe I should keep the snarky margin comments in one version and keep a separate clean copy on hand.

How did we get this remarkable book with all its layers? If my child comes to me, and asks for a Bible story there are many types to choose from and many translations. Tell Me A Story, might morph into tell me a myth; maybe some history, a pithy proverb if I’m in a hurry, a steamy love story, prophecies and prayers, an apocalypse or two, several letters, endless genealogical lists, etc. You name it; we have it right here! And, all these genres come from different time periods, different authors, and even different languages.

How did all these things, layers and sub-layers, everything but the kitchen sink, get packed into this one book? It took a **very**, long time. If we count the time that the oral traditions were being developed, it took over 1200 years. Even though these stories can be found in one book, they were not published and printed at the same time, either. As a matter of fact, a publisher today would probably scoff at the range of subjects. There are no other books quite like it.

We did not close the canon, that is, all the writings determined to be authoritative, until the year 367 A.D. (HarperCollins Bible Dictionary, p. 168). The first written accounts of Jesus were Paul’s letters, not the Gospels and the oldest Gospel is not Matthew, even though it is first Gospel listed.

This is a Jewish Tanakh. It is the Jewish Bible. I like to challenge confirmation classes to find a Gospel in it—any Gospel. But there aren’t any. This Bible contains the Hebrew Scriptures and from our Christian perspective, it only contains the Old Testament. I use this illustration because it demonstrates our spiritual Jewish heritage. When Jesus quotes the Bible, he quotes the Old Testament exclusively.

So, why recite all these details? Why highlight the many different layers of genre, time period, and authorship? Because the Bible is complicated. The Bible is contradictory. Yet, the Bible is the inspired Word of God. As United Methodists, we understand that human hands helped to transmit God’s words. That also, means that because humans were involved, there are imperfections and mistakes. We have stories that are disputed, and stories that are not actually written by the person it is attributed to. The Bible is complex, with many wonders all thrown together. And, despite the human imperfections we can detect, it is **good**. All the distinct layers make it good—like a layer of chocolate, a layer of caramel, and layer of nougat, and so on.

We can tell the stories over and over and find new meanings every time. The Bible helps us grow our relationship with God. It defies logic; it invites, challenges, and pushes the reader to make sense of what they have read. The Bible sparks debate, discussion, and tough questions. It is the Living Word of God and cultivating a relationship with the Bible helps us renew our relationship with God.

Maybe you feel like you are in over your head when you read the Bible? I know I do. Or, maybe you are frustrated by some of the things you have read or have been told about the Bible? I know I am—frequently. However, the effort itself, even when it is frustrating, or sometimes because it is frustrating, can yield new knowledge and insights—we may have a God moment!

How many of us re-read stories every now and then? Do we gain something? Is it for comfort to visit characters we haven't visited in a while? Do we find new issues, questions, traits to consider? Maybe all of these. I think of books like my friends and I pull them off the shelf for comfort and settle in for a good visit. The Bible can be a friend, too. Sometimes, maybe even most of the time, depending on our season of life, the Bible can be frustrating. Regardless of what season we are in, our friendship with the Bible can make our relationship with God better.

Now, let's take a closer look at one of the many types of stories in the Bible. A close reading of a parable layer. The parable genre happens to be one of Jesus' favorite tools and he uses it skillfully.

Jesus is questioned by the lawyer twice. And, twice Jesus turns the questions back to him. The lawyer is testing Jesus. He is trying to catch Jesus and trip him up. The lawyer knows the Bible. He knows the right answers. A lawyer in the time of Jesus studies religious law because that is the only kind of law. Yet, he asks questions that he obviously already knows the answers to. The correct answers he provides Jesus come from Deuteronomy and Leviticus. However, Jesus provides him with a better way to look at the answers he already knows.

Jesus knows that if our entire being, our very guts are occupied loving God, then we will love our neighbor and ourselves as a natural outcome. The lawyer doesn't see this nuanced argument, though, and he tries again to go after Jesus.

Wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" (v. 29). Jesus replies with the parable and radically changes the boundaries of all who are listening—and by extension, us. Neighbor is defined as all people, everywhere. Period. It could be the person that we have a fence line dispute with. It could be family members we are estranged from. It could be our political opponents across the aisle. But we are called to love our neighbors as ourselves. Not just when it is convenient or safe or practical. Neighbor includes your enemies—Samaritans and Jews were not on favorable terms and there was bitter tension between them.

Jesus' parables always have a double meaning. And, upon first hearing this parable, Jesus' audience must have been shocked. Jesus took ordinary things, people, and situations and turned them into thought provoking stories.

When Jesus tells the lawyer to "go and do likewise" (v. 37), it seems like the lawyer knew the specifics without actually understanding the situation. The lawyer could tell you the kind of trees he was standing next to without being able to tell you what forest he was in. Perhaps the lawyer wanted an easy answer and got more than he could handle. Jesus confronted the lawyer with his own blindness and turned his world upside down.

When everyone was expecting to be told the definition of neighbor, Jesus blows their expectations out of the water and tells them **everyone** is to be their neighbor. They were expecting limits and Jesus told them that Samaritans, the enemy, were their neighbors.

Now we turn back to the Bible, in general. How do we engage this book, today? We **live** the Story. When John Wesley asked the question: "Did the Bible live in me today?" He was asking because the Bible is one of our best tools. If we interact with the Bible in small, bite size portions, what will we gain? When we seek understanding, we grow. The Bible is God's revelation to us. When Jesus tells the lawyer to "Go and do likewise" (v. 37), it is a call to arms. When we use the Bible, sift through it, sort it out, and struggle with it, we get a prescription for life eternal.

When we love God with all of our being we will know God's grace. In this way, we build our relationship with God. When we love God and experience grace, we respond by loving our neighbors and spreading the good news of the Gospel.

I have been struggling with this sermon all week. What I really want to let you know is that despite the chaos that surrounds the Bible, whether it is our cultural attitudes, our personal baggage, or being overwhelmed by all the different layers and sub-layers, **we can still find God in this book**. I know that God is revealed in this book. I have struggled to get the perfect point and the perfect analogy, because I like to be right. But, I am only human and my flaws will show up, just like the human flaws show up in the Bible itself. Yet, in the end, if you walk out those doors trying to think about where I went wrong—I win and you win. I have grown in my understanding and you have grown in your understanding. If we all walk out those doors thinking about God—people everywhere will benefit. Our relationship with God is alive and we have engaged the Living Word of God!

The Bible is complex, but **it is good!** When we engage it and learn from it we know God. It's not something that we just do within these four walls. When Jesus said, "Go and do likewise" (v. 37), we are to take these words into ourselves—our whole being, and take it out into the world. That is when we can love our neighbors. When we internalize the Good Book and spread the news of God's grace to all our neighbors. May the God of all grace and the God of all glory speak to us always through the Living Word! Amen.