

“Like a Good Neighbor” (Stories – part 3)

Luke 10:25-37

Have you ever been stranded and needed help? Given the overwhelming accessibility to cell phones, it is hard to imagine being completely at the mercy of strangers.

However, I can recall one time when I was stranded. When I was an exchange student in Germany, I went jogging one evening in the woods near my host family’s house. When I returned from a long run, I discovered that I had lost my house key. It started getting dark and cold, and none of my hosts were home, so I did the only sane thing possible: I went next door to a completely unknown neighbor, and, in broken German, I asked if I could come inside and wait. I sat there with Herr Buehnemann for almost an hour, sweaty, in shorts and a T-shirt, while he fed me bread and cheese and introduced his daughter, his wife, and his dog. After my hosts finally came home, I said thanks and walked back next door. My host family was surprised to learn that Herr Buehnemann was so helpful. Apparently he was a shy, reclusive man. He hardly ever spoke a word to them, but after my adventure, he was quite friendly.

I know from that experience how amazing it is to be the recipient of a stranger’s hospitality. After being vulnerable, I found myself warm and safe in the comfort of friendly people.

What is it like on the other side, though? Have you ever been in places where someone asked you for help, and you weren’t sure if you should give it? One instance still haunts me. When I was in college, a young African-American woman came up to my car, asking me for help. She told me she was running away from her husband, and she asked me for money. I was living in Evanston at

the time, just ten miles north of downtown Chicago. I remember seeing that she was clearly distraught. It was about seven o'clock in the morning, and she was walking downtown in disheveled clothes. I had exactly twenty dollars on me, my ATM card wasn't working, and I needed cash for the tollway in order to drive back home to Michigan. But I gave her the twenty anyway. I remember in return, she tried to give me her wedding band, but I refused it. In retrospect, I don't think I was very generous with her, but I had obvious reservations about giving a complete stranger cash. It's not something I usually do.

Recalling both of these stories really makes me feel conflicted inside. When we are victims, we really want help, and we receive it gladly. But when we see someone else in need, what is our first reaction? Do we think, “Will this be convenient for me? Is it safe? Do I know them? Shouldn't I just call 911 and keep driving?”

The choice between convenience and compassion is never easy. We have to ask ourselves, what does God expect of us?

Fortunately, there is a famous story that Jesus once told that gives us an answer, if we are willing to listen. This story is commonly known as the parable of the Good Samaritan. Let's read it together.

(Read Luke 10:25-37)

A sentence pops out to me here. Maybe you noticed it, too. In verse 29, it says, the lawyer wanted to “justify himself.” The Message version puts it this way: he was “looking for a loophole.” You see, this man was not a lawyer, as in an attorney. He studied the Jewish scripture – what we call the Old Testament, specifically, the first five books. He knew God's word. He had excellent “head knowledge” of the scripture, but apparently not much “heart knowledge.” He

gave Jesus the right answer: Love God and love your neighbor. But it appears this lawyer needed a practical example. Maybe he was hoping that his neighbors were his people. After all, Leviticus 19:18, which the man quoted, actually says this: “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among **your people**, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.”

“Your people.” Your friends. Your neighbors. It is like saying to us, “your fellow Americans.” The lawyer was hoping there was a limit to the number of people he had to love. If so, he would be surprised, and maybe disappointed, by Jesus’ answer.

Jesus proceeds to tell a parable, a story with a familiar scene to which all can relate. A man, presumably Jewish, is walking the long, dangerous road from Jerusalem down to Jericho. InterVarsity Press Commentary describes it this way: It was “a seventeen-mile journey... This rocky thoroughfare was lined with caves that made good hideouts for robbers and bandits. The road was notoriously dangerous, the ancient equivalent to the inner city late at night.” As Jesus sets the scene, the people are already anticipating something bad to happen. Sure enough, a man is attacked and left for dead. Jesus’ audience is hooked. Someone is in trouble. Someone is stranded. Who will be the hero?

At first, it seems there is good fortune, as a priest happens by. But he does not stop. Neither does a Levite. In modern terms, that would be like the pastor and the worship leader passing by, both of them avoiding even looking at the man. No one, it seems, wants to get involved. We don’t know why. Could it be because Jewish purification laws were so strict, that touching a dead body would be offensive to the priest and Levite? Were they so lost in thought that they missed the man? Unlikely, since Jesus says they both intentionally crossed to the

other side of the road as they passed by. Maybe they were just insensitive people. Jesus doesn't say. And I think that is intentional. Any of us could think of a dozen reasons why we wouldn't stop. Maybe it was a trap. Maybe we would become victims, too.

At this point, the audience is probably waiting for Jesus to say, “But the third man to pass by was a common Jew...” - maybe a fisherman, a tax collector, a beggar, or even a leper or a prostitute – anyone Jesus had ministered to. Instead, Jesus says, “But a Samaritan...” **But** indeed.

This is where context is so important. We think “Good Samaritan,” like the paragraph heading in your bible, and we imagine some nice, foreign stranger. Actually, Samaritans and Jews hated each other. It would be something like Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland. Sunni and Shiite Muslims in the Middle East. To the first century Jews, Samaritans were the “bad guys.” My Harper Collins Bible Commentary says the Samaritans were considered “ceremonially unclean, socially outcast, religious heretics.” Certainly not heroes.

And Jesus makes the enemy into a hero. The grace in this passage is completely surprising. The Samaritan – the enemy – stops, administers first aid, and takes the injured man on his own donkey to an inn, where he pays the innkeeper enough for the man to stay for over three weeks. He promises even more money if the bill exceeds that amount. All this for a complete stranger he saw stranded on the road.

There is only one conclusion to this story. The lawyer cannot wiggle out of this one. When Jesus asks, “Which of the three was the neighbor?” the lawyer knows the answer. But he still cannot bring himself to mention the Samaritan by

name. He simply says, “The one who had mercy on him.” “Yup,” says Jesus. “Now go and do the same thing.”

No excuses. You cannot be a follower of Jesus and say, “I’ll only help those people that I like. Those people I can trust. The ones who can pay me back. The ones who look like me, think like me, act like me, share my values, believe in the same God as me.” If you want to show others mercy, you cannot make a checklist.

You know that in this country right now we have a huge problem with racism. We teach our children that there are differences based on our skin color, our language, and our religions. And instead of showing mercy, we spew hatred. This is not how God designed our world to be.

I want you to do something for me right now. Picture in your mind someone who makes you anxious, or even afraid. Maybe it is a specific person. Maybe it is more general, like the homeless, drug addicts, convicts, gang members. Someone with heavy piercings and tattoos. Maybe someone of a different nation and religion. Imagine even a member of ISIS or the Taliban, a radical in full religious attire, even carrying a weapon.

Now imagine how you would feel if your car broke down late one night on the streets of some major city, and this person came up to your window. But instead of attacking you, they say, “I’ve got some jumper cables. Give me a minute, and I’ll have you on your way. And here is \$50 in case you need to get some gas.”

Would you be surprised? Would you do that for someone else? Jesus is not saying that we buy our way into heaven. He is not saying salvation is based on works. Remember, rule #1 is Love God. Rule #2 is love your neighbor. What

Jesus is saying is, if you have an authentic relationship with him, you will automatically love your neighbor, and that will cost you.

Compassion is costly, at least in earthly terms. It costs time, money, and effort, and there should be no consideration of what you will receive back.

Compassion is commanded by God. Do you remember Micah 6:8?

“He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.

And what does the Lord require of you?

To act justly and to love mercy

and to walk humbly with your God.”

No one ever said following Jesus is easy. Matthew 16:24 says, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Showing compassion to others, especially your enemies, is difficult. It is different from how the world behaves. And precisely so. We sang a song on Wednesday night here at Grant Norsworthy’s concert. “They will know we’re disciples by our love.” Right or wrong, the world, outside our four walls, is going to judge us by Jesus’ words. They will notice if we love our neighbors sacrificially.

Do you want to inherit eternal life? If the answer is yes, you need a relationship with Jesus. Not a casual, “I’ll see you on Sunday, Jesus,” relationship, but an intense, life-giving, cross-bearing, self-sacrificing relationship. You need a relationship where Jesus is first, and you obey all of his commands. And I need that relationship, too.

So who are the people in Bellaire that have fallen by the side of the street? Who are the weak, abused, hurt, who barely have the strength to cry out for help? Will you hear them? Will you see them? Will you do something? Would

you sponsor a child in a third world country with an organization like Compassion International? Even if they have a different ethnicity or religion?

Will we respond like Jesus commands us to? Will we support the mission of the church, as we promised in our membership vows, by our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness? God is at work in this world, showing compassion through the hands and feet of disciples of Jesus Christ, those who have said, “Yes, Jesus, I will follow you no matter what the cost.” Let us be loving neighbors to all, that all might know and love God.

8:30 Service Response: Prayer of Confession

Compassionate God, whose dwelling is with the humble and contrite, hear your children’s prayer, and grant us your mercy. For unholy thoughts and words, for impure motives, for any scorn of goodness and indifference to beauty, for trifling with the truth and being petty when we could be gracious, forgive us. For the wrong we have done our neighbors, for silence in the face of violence, for neglect of generosity, for ingratitude, for failure in pursuing justice, for ignoring others’ pain, forgive us. For lack of love toward you, for doubt in your goodness, for slowness of faith to follow Jesus, forgive us. We gather now to worship and praise you and we thank you for your never-ending mercy and grace. Amen.

10:30 Service response

“Who Is My Neighbor?: A Responsive Reading” Based on Luke 10:25-37

by The Rev. Dr. Kwasi I. Kena

One: We cry out for spiritual blessings.

Many: What must I do to inherit eternal life?

One: We declare that we have done what God asked of us.

Many: We have loved the Lord with all of our heart, soul, strength and mind.

One: Have you loved your neighbor as yourself?

Many: Yes.

One: Later, we have second thoughts and ask a curious question.

Many: Who is my neighbor?

One: Jesus tells us a story about someone who traveled through *that neighborhood*.

Many: We know the neighborhood. We drive around it, especially after dark.

One: The inevitable happened and *those people* attacked the traveler.

Many: Should have known better. Nobody with sense travels through there.

One: Wounded and unconscious, the traveler lay on the street.

A preacher late for an appointment drove around the traveler and thought,

"Someone's probably called 911 already."

Many: You never know if it's safe to stop these days.

One: A leader in the church drove by, but didn't stop.

Many: Probably thought it was a wino or a drug addict.

One: One of *those people* saw the wounded traveler and stopped to help.

Outsiders seem to know that tomorrow they may need someone to help them.

Many: That was a risky thing to do.

One: Which of these people do you think was a neighbor to the wounded traveler?

Many: The answer is obvious.

All: Help us to do what God obviously expects us to do.

From *The Africana Worship Book Year C*)

<http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/who-is-my-neighbor-a-responsive-reading-based-on-luke-1025-37>

SENDING FORTH

Sisters and brothers, we are not dismissed.

We are not just free to go.

Christ sends us!

Go in the power of the Spirit to love and serve the Lord.

Go to help and heal in all you do.

All: Thanks be to God.

The pastor then blesses the people.

May the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord make his face shine upon and be gracious to you. May the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. Amen.