

“Living Within Our Means: Choosing Compassion”
Luke 10:25-37

We all know this New Testament story, don't we? This is one of the stories of the Bible that is known by both Christians and non-Christians alike. It is so well known, in fact, that 'Good Samaritan' is a common title we use to refer to someone who does something good for someone else, especially a stranger. We, as a society, value offering each other a helping hand. There are even laws dubbed "Good Samaritan laws." These laws require people to offer some sort of "reasonable assistance to a person in need."¹ Some of you may remember the 1998 series finale of the show *Seinfeld*, in which four of the main characters of this show stood by and laughed at a man who was being mugged. They were all tried under a 'Good Samaritan law' for not providing assistance to this man. Each was found guilty and sentenced to a year in prison.

Now, this is a little unrealistic, but I fear the fact that we have literally turned this parable into law reveals something troubling about how we have interpreted it and applied it to our lives. It seems that we have perhaps missed the point. While, in some ways, we have reduced this parable to humanism, we have in other ways made this story into a "moral exhortation" – a duty that we are bound legally to follow.² We all want to "inherit eternal life," as the expert in the law does, and this is what Jesus requires of us, right?

Are these the things that Jesus was really trying to get across, though? If not, what are we missing in this story? I would like to suggest that we try to look at this parable afresh this morning.

We all know the basic premise... A man is traveling on a road from Jerusalem to Jericho when he is jumped, stripped, beaten, robbed and left for dead. The two men you would have thought would have stopped to help don't, while a third man does stop. This third man cares for the injured man. So, what is the general idea? Jesus is making the point that we should see everyone as our neighbor, that we shouldn't act like the first two jerks, and should help those in need like the third. This is what the law expert wanted to know, right? Done... move on to the story about Martha and Mary. But not so fast!

At this point, I think we need to lay aside what we think we know about the story and consider a few details, which we might have missed by being 2000 years removed from the context. For instance, what we might not know is that it was well-known that the road from Jerusalem to Jericho was extremely dangerous. Jesus' listeners would have known this. In fact, in the fifth century, St. Jerome tells us that this road was still called "The Red, or the Bloody Way," and as late as the 1930s, H.V. Morton, a journalist and pioneering travel writer, informs us that he was warned to get home before dark if he intended to use the road.³ So, people knew not to travel alone on this road, especially if they were carrying goods or valuables. Travelers usually sought

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Good_Samaritan_law

² Andrew Purves, *The Search for Compassion: Spirituality and Ministry* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989) 46.

³ Some quotes and stories referenced come from a previous sermon I had written. Unfortunately, I am not sure of the original sources now.

safety in numbers by traveling in convoys or caravans. It would seem, then, that this unfortunate traveler in the parable was being pretty careless by traveling alone.

Another important key to interpreting this story is to know that the men who passed by this injured traveler had a great deal to lose by stopping to help this man. While Jesus doesn't say why these men didn't stop, commentators have suggested some pretty good reasons. To begin with, given that this was a perilous road, each man risked being attacked himself by stopping to help, as these men surely were familiar with the habit of the bandits to use decoys to draw in their prey. One of the bandits would act the part of a wounded man, and when some unsuspecting traveler stopped over him to help, the others would rush in on him and overpower him.

This might have been of particular concern to the Levite, as this group was apparently known for playing it safe. We all know this sort of people... the ones that fill up their gas tank when they still have half a tank left... the ones that keep their money stashed in their mattress... the ones that don't wander far from home at night. I will admit... I am in this category. I blame my dad, who used to tell me things like, "Jon, the more you drive around town the more likely you are to get into an accident." Thanks, Dad, that is very insightful.

For the priest, the risk was also perhaps an issue of missing opportunities in his profession. The priest knew that if he touched the injured man, especially if the injured man turned out to be dead, he would become unclean according to the law, which could possibly cause him to lose his turn of duty in the Temple. He didn't want this man, who he might not even be able to help, to get in the way of his career.

These are pretty legitimate concerns, aren't they? I mean, there are streets in Pittsburgh that most of us would not stop on at night to help someone in need. We might call the cops, but we would be taking a huge risk to stop and help. This was the excuse of Seinfeld and his friends. The guy had a gun. What were we supposed to do? So perhaps these two men weren't the jerks that we sometimes make them out to be. It seems to me that if we are honest about it, they had some pretty justifiable reasons for not stopping... concerns, possibly, that we would have... like about our safety, about the use of our time and energy, about the consequences on our families and careers.

I will be honest, I, the one who is always cautious, am tempted to think, as well, "It is that guy's own fault that he is in that situation. Why should I put myself at risk and waste my time and energy helping him get out of a situation that he could have easily avoided? He got himself into that situation; he should get himself out." Have you ever said that? Have you ever thought that? I think that it is not uncommon for us religious folk, who are very careful about how we live our lives, to find it very frustrating to see people behave in really stupid ways that get themselves into trouble. Friends, we have valid concerns if we feel this way.

But before we let ourselves off the hook, let us see what we learn from the Samaritan. What is Jesus' message to us in this character? Well, perhaps some of you might know a little something about the Samaritans. They were despised, right? As one Biblical scholar points out, "Samaritans were the descendants of a mixed population occupying the land following the conquest by Assyria... Ceremonially unclean, socially outcast, and religiously a heretic, the Samaritan is the

very opposite of the lawyer as well as the priest and the Levite.”⁴ The Samaritans were the mutts of Israel.

I am not even sure we can come up with a good analogy for this group today. Perhaps it is the illegal immigrants that we view as being the ones who are stealing American jobs or illegitimately receiving benefits that they are not paying taxes for... maybe it is the Taliban. Either way, can you imagine the shock that it must have been to those listening to this story to hear that it is the Samaritan that is the neighbor... the one who is not even viewed as a member of the community?

It should be interesting to us, then, that Jesus uses this character. Obviously, Jesus wants to make the point that our neighbors are more than just those in our own crowd. I don't know about all of you, but, for me, this seems to make the Samaritan the hardest to relate to. Perhaps Jesus intended for us to think about this, though. You see, I think that the lesson that Jesus is teaching us has to do with more than just some legalistic demands of the Gospel. I think it has more to do than just being nice to one another, too. What does it mean to love each other as Christians? I think that story is used to illustrate that loving each other means being compassionate. Well, what in the world is compassion?

It is a word that comes up often in the Church. We also know that it was one of the hallmarks of Jesus' ministry, right? We read throughout the Gospel that Jesus saw people who were hurting in some way and that he had compassion on them. This word in the Greek “literally means to have one's bowels turned over.”⁵ We might refer to this feeling as “gut-wrenching.” But this isn't just feeling sorry for someone, nor is it just having pity on them. The root for our English word compassion sheds light on its true meaning. It comes from two Latin words, which literally translated means “to suffer with.”

So, being compassionate means coming alongside someone who is suffering. Immediately, we know that this is difficult. We don't even like to deal with our own suffering, so we certainly don't want to deal with someone else's suffering. There is a reason why many of us avoid hospitals at all costs. One of my favorite Christian authors, Henri Nouwen, wrote, “It is not surprising that compassion, understood as suffering with, often evokes in us a deep resistance and even protest... Our first, most spontaneous response to pain and suffering is to avoid it, to keep it at arm's length; to ignore, circumvent, or deny it.” We react in this way, don't we? We don't like to even see pictures of people hurting, so we certainly don't like to be around suffering.

But we have to enter into this suffering in order to be compassionate. Nouwen points out that no one has ever led someone out of the desert without entering into the desert themselves. We have to be prepared to enter into someone else's mess for the sake of pulling them out. So, compassion, simply put, is not safe. It requires great risk and vulnerability. It costs us something. For the Samaritan, this meant risking his own safety, being willingly to come alongside one who was suffering, and giving of his time and money.

⁴ Fred B. Craddock, *Luke: Interpretation* (Louisville, John Knox Press, 1990) 150.

⁵ Purves, 18.

In light of this, it is perhaps no wonder that the Samaritan did what he did. As a Samaritan, who was looked down upon and rejected by society, he understood firsthand what being beat down and rejected felt like. He knew firsthand what it meant to suffer and was, therefore, able to respond in a compassionate manner. He didn't move to the other side of the road to avoid the hurt man, but he picked him up, carried the man to safety, and cared for him in an appropriate manner. The Samaritan put himself at risk in the biggest possible way because he extended his love without a guarantee that the love he had extended would ever return to him.

But how is it that we can love others in this way? Well, I think it begins by asking who we really are, first and foremost, in this story. I would like to suggest that it is not the Samaritan, as we hope and strive to be, but neither is it the priest or the Levite. These are the people we immediately look to, but I think that we all have to recognize and confess that before we can be the Good Samaritan we are the traveler who is robbed, beaten, and left for dead. Sin has robbed us of the life God intends for us, leaving us alone to die... in a place where our only hope is the mercy and compassion of one willing to make himself or herself vulnerable to help us. Isn't this what God has done for us? We have a God who left His throne in heaven, come down to get into the ditch with us, to become a suffering servant for us. And He risked it all and acted compassionately by hanging on a cross and dying for us. He, too, extended love without the guarantee that it would be returned to Him. Friends, we have received life-restoring compassion in Jesus Christ.

Therefore, as those who are in need of compassion and who have freely received compassion, we have to get rid of this attitude that we are so different from others in need. We have to get rid of this attitude that we don't have the same capacity for stupidity and evil as the next person. Charles Colson, who was Special Counsel for President Nixon, tells of a Jewish man who stepped in and watched a part of Eichmann's war crime trial. After a few moments, he burst into tears. Someone next to him said, "Your anger must be unbearable." The Jewish man replied, "No, it isn't anger. The longer I sit here, the more I realize I have a heart like his."

The more we take the time to listen and learn about one another, the more we realize that we all struggle with our depravity. We are all only human. We are all traveling on the same road. No matter how well we have our own life together, we have to accept that we have the same capability to get ourselves in any mess humanly possible. When we are able to recognize this, we have recognized the need for compassion. We learn that you and I need it just as much as the next person.

Further, we need each other. Walter Tubbs once stated that "If I just do my thing and you do yours, we stand in danger of losing each other and ourselves... We are fully ourselves only in relation to each other; the I detached from a Thou disintegrates. I do not find you by chance; I find you by an active life of reaching out."

The whole point of this sermon series is to recognize places in our lives where we can move away from the chaos of the world and live into the order that God has created. Although it might sound really strange to say that suffering with each other is moving away from chaos, this is the point of compassion. It is about moving beyond our sinful tendency to live selfishly and in isolation from each other. Jesus Christ has called us out of this life of darkness into a life of relationship, as we were created to be... a life in Him. It is in Him that we are unified and can share a life together. This life involves hurting together as much as it means rejoicing together.

This is why Colossians tells us to clothe ourselves with compassion, to bear with each other, and to allow love to bind us together.

Moreover, we must understand that if we are in Christ, who reveals His compassion as the suffering servant, then understandably part what it means to be a Christian includes being compassionate by suffering with others. In doing this, we participate in what God is doing in the world and live into our baptismal identity. So, in order to learn to love compassionately, we must not only recognize our commonalities with others in our need for compassion, but we also recognize our own acts of compassion as a participation in the life of God. It is God who empowers us with the strength, courage, and peace to join in His mission. God has compassion for the world. The question is for us, “Are we willing to figure out how to get in on the action?” As the Body of Christ in the world, I hope our answer is a resounding “YES!” Otherwise, we end up like the priests, who Jesus condemned as keeping trivial matters of the law while neglecting important matters. And, in this, we discover why Jesus told the expert in the law a story to answer his question instead of simply telling him to love his neighbors. Jesus reveals that the way to eternal life is in our “going and doing likewise,” in which we find life by living in the One who has defeated death for us.

I want to close this morning with a story because I know the task at hand can be overwhelming. Some of you may be familiar with this story. A businessman and his wife were exhausted from their daily commitments to their work, church, and friends. Needing a break, they escaped for a few days of relaxation at an oceanfront hotel. One night a violent storm lashed the beach that sent massive waves thundering against the shore. The man lay in his bed listening and thinking about his own stormy life of never-ending demands and pressures. The wind finally died down and shortly before daybreak the man slipped out of bed and took a walk along the beach to see what damage had been done. As he strolled, he saw that the beach was covered with starfish that had been thrown ashore and helplessly stranded by the great waves. Once the morning sun burned through the clouds, the starfish would dry out and die. Suddenly the man saw an interesting sight. A young boy who had also noticed the plight of the starfish was picking them up, one at a time, and flinging them back to the ocean. “Why are you doing that?” the man asked the kid as he got close enough to be heard. “Can’t you see that one person will never make a difference – you’ll never be able to get all those starfish back into the water? There are just too many.” “Yes, that’s true,” the boy sighed as he bent over and picked up another and tossed it back into the water. Then as he watched it sink, he looked at the man, and smiled, and said, “But it sure made a difference to that one.”

This boy understood compassion. My prayer for us this morning is that none of us would be overwhelmed by the immense brokenness of this world, but we would set out to participate in God’s work of restoring it one piece at a time. It may seem like a drop in the ocean, but it will make an enormous difference to someone. We have to be willing to enter into the trenches with each other, though, begin picking each other up, and setting each other back in the ocean of God’s love one person at a time... because our God has done that for us.