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April 29, 2018

Series: Kicking Buts

Sermon: But Its Not My Job!

Luke 10:25-37

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

26 “What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?”

27 He answered, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’[c]; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

28 “You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.”

29 But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

30 In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. 31 A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. 32 So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33 But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. 34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. 35 The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’

36 “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”

37 The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.”

Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”

Sermon

Every now and then, our news cycle turns positive, and we see what is right in the world. Maybe its someone on an airplane trying to help someone in need. It could be on a Michigan interstate where a bunch of truck drivers parked under an overpass so a suicidal man couldn’t jump all the way to the pavement. Maybe it’s at a waffle house down south, where someone stops and gunman from doing more damage. Or someone who jumps onto the subway tracks to help someone who has fallen, and about to get wacked by the D Train. Good Samaritans, doing their thing. We’ve all heard the term before, good Samaritan. Doing things that shouldn’t have been their job in the first place, but there they are.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan is one of Jesus' most familiar stories, and the way we usually hear that parable is as Jesus' way of getting us to ask ourselves, "Am I willing, when the circumstances arise, to be a Good Samaritan to other people? If I see a person lying in a ditch somewhere or in trouble on the highway or on subway tracks in distress, would I risk myself to be of help? Am I a Good Samaritan?

But I wonder if that's what Jesus was really saying in that parable.

Let's take another look at it. You may remember how it happened that Jesus told the Parable of the Good Samaritan. He was headed toward Jerusalem, and in a village along the way, he got involved in a rather testy conversation with a local attorney. The lawyer evidently did not like Jesus' message, and he was pressing Jesus, trying to make him look foolish, attempting to expose a weakness in his teaching. "In your view," the lawyer asked Jesus, "just what do I need to do to inherit eternal life?"

"You're the lawyer," said Jesus. "What does it say in the law?"

Well, the attorney knew the law, of course, the law of Moses, and he quoted it. "The law says, 'Love God with all your heart and soul and strength and mind and also love your neighbor as you love yourself.'"

"Well," said Jesus. "There you have it. You're right. Love God fully and love your neighbor as yourself. Do this and you will have life."

But the lawyer was not going to let this drop so easily. "Ahh, but wait just a second," he objected. "There's a problem with your definitions here. State your terms, Jesus. Just what do you mean by 'neighbor'? Be precise here. Who exactly is my neighbor?"

It was in response to that challenge that Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan. It's not the story about the man in a waffle house, or trucks on an interstate, of course, but it's like it. Jesus' parable is about a man traveling down to Jericho who is mugged by robbers and left bleeding and near death beside the road. Nothing unusual about this, really. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was notoriously dangerous, riddled with thieves, unsafe to travel alone, so the fact that a man was beaten and robbed...well that was a familiar story. Nothing shocking. But now, two genuinely shocking things do happen in Jesus' story. The first shock is that two people who could have helped, in fact who might have been expected to help, a priest and a Levite, both religious people, came up the road and saw the man in trouble, but did nothing, absolutely nothing. They intentionally avoided the man by crossing over to the other side of the road and continuing on their journey. This would be like saying that the pastor of a large church or a police chief saw someone in trouble, but simply shrugged their shoulders, turned, and walked the other way. That would be a shock. In all honesty, the law forbade the first two from helping. The guys was "like dead", and in that day and age, you would become unclean by touching a dead person. They were just following the law. Which is shocking in and of itself. But if the first shock in the story is that people whom we would expect to help did nothing, the second, and even bigger, shock is that the last person in the world we would count on for help is the one who in fact mercifully and bravely rescues the injured man.

Down the road, said Jesus, came a Samaritan. Now Jesus is, of course, Jewish, and the lawyer and the rest of those listening to this parable are also Jews. Even the characters in the parable are Jews-the priest, the Levite, almost surely the injured man, maybe even the robbers. But here comes a Samaritan, and Jews and Samaritans have a bitter history of racial and religious hatred. They have nothing to do with each other. Jews and Samaritans are enemies. In fact, not only would the injured man not expect any help out of one of these despicable Samaritans, he probably wouldn't want any help from a Samaritan. A Samaritan was viewed, well, like a member of ISIS. Better to die in a pool of blood on the road than to be touched by a Samaritan. But it is this Samaritan, despised and rejected, who is nevertheless moved with compassion and who tenderly cares for the injured man. Even though they were enemies, he cared for him.

Having told that story, Jesus now says to the lawyer, "So, you now define the term 'neighbor.' Who proved to be the neighbor in this story?"

The lawyer cannot bring himself even to spit out the word "Samaritan." He simply mumbles, "The one who showed mercy."

"Go and do likewise," said Jesus.

Now, as I said before, some people think that what Jesus is saying in this story is, "OK everybody, I want you to go out and be just like that Good Samaritan. He cared for someone in need; I want you to imitate him. Go and do likewise." But there are two problems with this. The first problem is that if this were really Jesus' point, then he probably would have told the story differently. He would have made it into a simple moral example and left out all that troubling Samaritan business. What he would have said is there was a man in trouble, and three people passed by who could have helped. The first one didn't, and neither did the second, but the third one did, so be like the third one and not like the first two. But this isn't a simple moral story. It's a parable, and parables always have something shocking, surprising, unexpected, something to be wrestled with and puzzled over, and in this story, it is the fact that an unwanted, rejected Samaritan is the one who shows mercy to his enemy. That throws a monkey wrench into any simple explanation. There's something deeper going on here than merely, "OK folks, go out and be like that Good Samaritan."

The second problem is even more significant. If Jesus' point is that he wants us to imitate the courageous compassion of the Good Samaritan, the sad fact is we can't do it. That is why the stories of Good Samaritans are always neat to hear. They don't happen too often. Robert Wuthnow, a professor at Princeton University, once conducted some research about why some people are generous and compassionate, while others are not. He found out that for many compassionate people something had happened to them. Someone had acted with compassion toward them, and this experience had transformed their lives. For example, Wuthnow tells the story of Jack Casey, a rescue squad worker, who had little reason to be a Good Samaritan. Casey was raised in a tough home, the child of an alcoholic father. He once said, "All my father ever taught me is that I didn't want to grow up to be like him."

But something happened to Jack when he was a child that changed his life, changed his heart. He was having surgery one day, and he was frightened. He remembers the surgical nurse standing there and compassionately reassuring him. "Don't worry," she said to Jack. "I'll be here right beside you no matter what happens." And when Jack woke up again, she was true to her word and still there. Years later, Jack Casey, now a paramedic, was sent to the scene of a highway accident. A man was pinned upside down in his pickup truck, and as Jack was trying to get him out of the wreckage, gasoline was dripping down on both of them. The rescuers were using power tools to cut the metal, so one spark could have caused everything to go up in flames. The driver was frightened, crying out how scared he was of dying. Jack remembered what had happened to him long ago on the operating table, how that nurse had spoken tenderly to him and stayed with him, and he said and did the same thing for the truck driver, "Look, don't worry," he said, "I'm right here with you, I'm not going anywhere." When I said that, Jack remembered later, I was reminded of how that nurse had said the same thing and she never left me. Days later, the rescued truck driver said to Jack, "You know, you were an idiot, the thing could have exploded and we'd both have been burned up!"

"I just couldn't leave you," Jack said.

Something had happened to Jack Casey that transformed him, made him into a Good Samaritan. Its true. Compassion produces more compassion. Bitterness produces more bitterness. Has anything like that ever happened to you? Yes it has. That is the point of Jesus' Parable of the Good Samaritan. What the lawyer discovered - and what we discover, too - is that we cannot stand on the sidelines and figure out how to be good, defining our terms-is this person my neighbor or not-figuring out just what we have to do to inherit eternal life.

For all of our religious virtues and attitudes, we just cannot do it. When I think of this story, there are days that I picture myself as the Priest or Levite. Good, well intentioned people, but who keep on going. There are days, good days, where I think I'm the good Samaritan. Rare days, but I think we all have a few in our history. But maybe, just maybe, I should think of myself as the other character. The one lying in a ditch. We don't think of ourselves like that, do we? The one who lies helpless and wounded beside the road, the one who needs to be rescued. And along comes a Good Samaritan, a Good Samaritan named Jesus - despised and rejected -who comes to save us, speaks tenderly to us, lifts us into his arms, and takes us to the place of healing. As Paul said, paraphrased a little bit, while we were still God's enemies, God saw us in the ditch and had compassion, and in Jesus came to save us.

So, the question is not the lawyer's, "What is the definition of 'neighbor'?" The question is who has been neighbor to you. Jesus Christ has been neighbor to you. The crucified one has been neighbor to you. Don't worry about who is your neighbor, worry about being neighbor. You have been saved. Compassion breeds compassion. Mercy breeds mercy. Then in your heart you will know what this means: Go and do likewise. And the family of God said, AMEN.