

“The Measure of Our Compassion”

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14 July 2019 + Gaithersburg Presbyterian Church

Luke 10:25-37 = the Good Samaritan

When Eddie Murphy was just 19, he was cast on Saturday Night Live. One of his most memorable sendups was a parody of Fred Roger’s children’s show. The parody was called “*Mr. Roberts’ Neighborhood*.” In that neighborhood, the denizens were unsavory: crack dealers, prostitutes, thieves, enforcers, a profoundly undesirable neighborhood.



However off-kilter, the skit gets to the essence of Jesus’ message in the parable of the Good Samaritan: “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus asks us: “How do you love your neighbor as yourself when you fear and loathe your neighbor?”

This parable should be shocking, although that shock seems to have worn off long ago. Messages saying “Good Sam Club” adorn spare tire covers on campers. Well-meaning though they are, they still miss Jesus’ meaning that it not just the offering of help, but rather a caregiver being a reviled, hated enemy crossing racial, ethnic lines. The parable’s power to provoke and transform has been lost.

Try to imagine who would be the most appalling person offering aid: for a homophobe it would be the Good Gay; for an Islamophobe, the Good Muslim; for a Pro-lifer, the Good Abortionist: the Good Liberal, the Good Conservative. With our crescendo of tragedies, of polarized politics making hate speech the standard when speaking of folks in another group, take your pick of your villain, your enemy. Whoever is the most horrifying to you, that’s the Samaritan in Jesus’ parable.

From suicide bombers on multiple continents to mass shootings from Sandy Hook to Orlando to officer-involved deaths from Ferguson to yesterday’s newspaper, to violence against police in Dallas, attacks on churches, synagogues and mosques, immigrant children in detention, the world today is asking the same question as the lawyer who approached Jesus: “Who is my



neighbor?” Yet if we are honest, the real question as he and we ask is rather: “Who is not my neighbor? Who should I be able to not love, to dis-respect, to mistreat?”

Jesus wants this kind act by a person considered despicable to do something more than just make us more helpful. Jesus intends for it to make us shake with righteous indignation. Jesus wants us to judge the so-thought righteous passersby as unfaithful and the reviled Samaritan as righteous.

Jesus wants us to reel in confusion. Jesus wants to goad us beyond our comfortable lives. Jesus designed the parable to make us squirm. If it no longer does, it may be because we have domesticated it into a platitude.



No one admits to racial profiling, but we all know if our Good Samaritan with the wrong skin color, or with a turban or headscarf on their head stopped to render aid in the wrong neighborhood, that our Samaritan would be the first one arrested, the immediate suspect for the beating and robbery.



Could this happen today? Prejudice is alive and well, and living in all of us. I know a successful Hispanic restaurateur who lives in the supremely affluent and pretty much all-white Highland Park suburb of Dallas. He has been pulled over many times by the local police right in his own neighborhood without explanation.

That is, until he stopped driving his Lexus, bought an old pickup and began to carry around a lawn mower in the back. No police stops. Oh, yes, there are always people on the other side of some line, Samaritans if you will. Oh, yes, there is always prejudice against any considered ‘other.’

Jesus’ story of the Good Samaritan begins with an inquiry from a lawyer:

“What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Jesus returns the serve with an unexpected volley:

“What does the law say?”

And the lawyer answers rightly:

“Love God and love your neighbor as yourself”



That would have been the end of the conversation ~ except the lawyer pushed it further:

“And who is my neighbor?”

This lawyer may have been confused or he may have just not liked the first answer, so he tries the old switcheroo trick question strategy. Jesus’ first point is how easy it is for us to forget who our real neighbors are.

Jesus has a second point, even more important.

The lawyer quotes a section of the law which states the essence of the law is compassion. He then asks Jesus a very lawyerly question: what is the minimum legal requirement to fulfill this law? Jesus’ answer via the parable is a rhetorical question: **“Who’s the hero here? Who acted as ‘neighbor’ to the Jewish victim in our parable?”** Surely it is the one who shows compassion.



The Dalai Lama has said rightly, “The essence of all religions is ... compassion.”¹ Indeed, comparing all world religions, every one of them has a version of loving neighbor as self. Every religion has as its core a central concept: *compassion*.



Buddhism traces its origin to a “Samaritan” moment on the part of the young prince Siddhartha,² setting him on the path to become the Buddha. Our own scripture measures the righteousness of individuals and nations by the depth of their compassion ~ measured by *“loving neighbor as self,”* and *“how the strong treat the weak.”*³

Today’s parable measures our compassion not as the one who talks a good line. Not the one who hides behind legalistic trickery, but the one who actually acts with compassion.

Jesus has a third point. Jesus raises a critical eyebrow at the Priest and the Levite, who Jesus saw as maintaining the Law as a cover for withholding compassion.

The problem with the legalistic approach is that rules and laws at best can only restrain bad behavior,



but are at base incapable of engendering good behavior.

Rules cannot make us to love. The law can only encourage, cannot compel someone to do the right thing. Creating the perfect organizational structure does not make it humane. Jesus knew this. All the religious greats have known this. Mere legality is not enough. Compassion transcends the Law. God works on an infinitely higher plane.

At the Presbyterian General Assembly in Albuquerque in 1996, a year when the ban was reaffirmed on gay Clergy and lay leaders, late Monday night a woman commissioner was robbed in front of the deserted Convention Center. She was struck in the head and fell to the ground. Of the few persons around most fled, but a fellow Presbyterian came to her aid, driving the assailant off. He rendered first aid and stayed with her until she got adequate medical attention.



The story is bittersweet: that Good Samaritan who came to her aid, the only person who responded, taking considerable danger on himself, was a man recently fired from a church office because he was gay.

Jesus' point here is to transcend the Law, to reach beyond, to get to the essential core of God's character: Compassion. Jesus' final command today **"Go and do likewise"** compels us to love even enemies, compassion trumping prejudice, love conquering fear ~ to love, respect, accept and forgive



even those who never could, never would reciprocate.



Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan draws us inevitably and intimately into living compassion in every aspect of our lives, to enter God's impinging community ~ justice, peace, shalom, restoration ~ reconciliation with every enemy and creation itself:

"This, you see, is how much God loved the world: enough to give [God's] only, special [one] so that everyone who believes ... should not be lost but should share in the life of God's new age."⁴

God, our God, is all compassion.

God, the ground of our being, is compassion itself.

¹ attributed to the Dalai Lama

² Kosuke Koyama, "He had Compassion (Luke 10:31-33)" *Christian Century*, July 5-12, 1989, p. 651

³ Robin Meyers, *Why the Christian Right is Wrong* (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 2006) pp. 6-8, 49-51, 97

⁴ John 3:16 accurately translated by N. T. Wright, *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels* p.8