

Am I a Good Neighbor?©

Luke 10:25-37

July 14, 2013

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Such unexpected twists in Jesus stories! We love reading them, hearing the surprise in the people who are hearing them first hand. Jesus just totally turns things upside down – what you would normally expect, turns out to be the opposite of what happens.

And while we might enjoy listening in on the surprise of others – if we really listen we might find ourselves to be challenged as well.

I mean, really, which one of us would be willing to step over and kneel down, making ourselves vulnerable in a very dangerous place to help someone who is facedown, bloody, beaten and needing help?

We want to think we would do it but think about this: What if you were going through any city you know that has a high crime rate and had to take a detour into the most dangerous neighborhood of all.

It's a place known for gangs who beat people up for the fun of it; a place where the murder rate is sky high, where the people who live there are afraid to come out of their houses.

But while you are going through this rough area, your car breaks down and doggone it, you don't have any bars on your cell phone and you have no other choice but to get out and walk yourself out of that place.

And so, with fear and trepidation, that's what you do. You lock up your car, say a prayer for it, and for yourself, and starting walking. On top of all this, you are in a huge hurry to get to an important meeting.

Well, before long, you see a form of something on the sidewalk up ahead of you. You slow down because you aren't sure what it is. But, as you get closer you can see it is a body. Someone is lying there in a heap! Is it a man? A woman? A teenager? Is it alive or dead? Do you stop and see if you can help? Do you dare?

What if it is a set up; someone pretending to be hurt so they, and whoever is in the bushes, can attack you? And even if it is legitimate, where would you take him? How could you help? Plus, all that trying to figure it out will make you even later than you already are. People are waiting for you!

So, you decide the best thing – the safest thing – the most practical thing is to cross the street and keep walking – a little faster than before.

Besides, someone who is from this area, who is familiar with the neighborhood will probably come along soon, or will call the police, and they will come to help.

Now, that might sound callous, but really, if you were faced with that kind of situation, in a place so dangerous that you already fear for your life, would you stop to help?

I would like to think I would, but honestly, I would probably be too afraid. I would probably reason that when I got to safety myself, I would call the police and tell them where I saw the person. I could trust they would go to help.

On the other hand, what if this person doesn't have that much time? What if he or she needs attention immediately ... what if it's a matter of life or death?

Jesus' story that is known to us as the story of the Good Samaritan is very similar to the kind of situation I just mentioned.

The road to Jericho, which is where the scene takes place, is very rocky and hilly. It is known to be quite dangerous because there are so many good places for robbers to hide and then pounce on unexpected victims.

This man had that very thing happen to him. And he was left there, bleeding, injured, robbed – left to die.

Now, along comes a priest – a holy man who has gone through all the purification rites and was hurrying along to get to his destination for a holy service – people were waiting for him.

It would be kind of like – me – an ordained minister who was hurrying to a special service at the church, all my preparations done, my arrival timed just right. All of you waiting for me.

You would expect a minister or a priest, of all people, to stop and help someone who is hurt and dying.

But that ordained person looked the other way – walked across the street and avoided the situation. "I can't be late! I can't dirty my hands. I might get hurt, myself! What good would I be to anyone then?"

Well, then, another person – a Levite – who might be the same as - Shaun – our Commissioned Ruling Elder who has studied theology and worship and church polity and is prepared for serving the church as a lay pastor.

But still, in that position, one would expect he would, of all people, reach out to help a person in need. Yet he does not.

And while Jesus does not tell of any others who came along, except the one who did help – we could go on down the list – an Elder – a Deacon, a Christian who has been a long time church member.

The point is, the expected ones did not stop to help. It was the one least expected, the one whom the Jews detested – the Samaritan – that was the one who cared enough to put aside all his fears, all his prejudice, all his resentment for how he had been treated as a minority.

The Samaritan went out of his way to help the Jew who was in trouble. He cleansed his wounds, bandaged him up, helped him get to an inn where he could lie down and begin to heal.

Even when he left, he promised the innkeeper he would come back and see if there had been any thing else the man needed that he should pay for.

A Samaritan, of all people, was the one who offered the helping hand, the caring, compassionate heart, the fearless act of daring to help in a potentially dangerous situation.

I'm not even going to try to give a modern day example of who a Samaritan might be compared to. But you know who that would be in your mind.

We all have an image of someone who is a minority, someone who is a different race, a different religion, a different culture from ours.

It could be anyone we tend to stereotype in a certain category. Someone we are leery around; someone we don't trust ... for no real reason.

It's hard to see ourselves as the one Jesus is pointing to, isn't it? Our hearts mean well. We want to do what He expects of us. But often, in our human, fearful state, we fail. We are no better than the two who passed by.

You see the young lawyer who came to Jesus asking how he could inherit eternal life, was looking for a way around what he probably knew was the right answer.

When Jesus told him to follow the two greatest commandments – to love God with all you've got and to love your neighbor as you love yourself, his question was often our question too:

But, who is my neighbor?

If I don't know them, if they don't have a name, if they are not like me, if they come from another culture, another race, a different way of believing, if they are strung out on drugs or alcohol and dirty – so dirty I can't even see the color of their skin – surely I don't have to consider them my neighbor – do I, Jesus?

Ah, but let us remember – Jesus considered us – you and me and the guy down the street and those in the slums and those across the ocean in every situation his neighbor. So much so that he didn't just cross the road to help, he walked the road to Calvary, carried our cross and took the nails in his hands for us.

Out of pity for us he gave his life. Out of love for the world, God gave his Son. The question who is my neighbor might need to be changed to “Who Am I a Neighbor to?”

May God give us courage to be a neighbor to all those he leads us to.

May we be filled with the compassion of Christ, forgiving one another and serving others in selfless acts of love, for that is what we have been given in Jesus.

Amen.

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