

The Good Samaritan

Cheri Herrboldt

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Luke 10:25-37

Help! – It's the primal cry, the first word in a want ad, the last word on the toolbar of a computer screen. A song by the Beatles, a prayer to God, a phone call to 911. What we get by with a little of, what we could use a bit more of, what we were only trying to do when we were so badly misunderstood. What we'll be perfectly fine without, thank you very much.

It makes us human. It can make us suffer. It can make us insufferable. It can make all the difference in the world. It can fall short.

We are, almost by definition and certainly from the beginning of our lives, creatures who require a lot of help. No human newborn stands up on shaky legs to suckle its first meal. Nor can we imagine a fully formed adult who could qualify as human without giving some form of help to another.

Help is part of our humanity; it is what human beings do. If it is complicated, inconclusive, that is because we are.

"But who is my neighbor?" a lawyer asks Jesus. The lawyer seems to want some kind of a box with which to limit his obligations to help. The question the lawyer is really asking is, "Who is NOT my neighbor?" Where in God's name are the boundaries?

The hapless traveler is assaulted on the road between Jericho and Jerusalem. Along with the rest of the human race, he thinks of himself as going somewhere.

The priest and the Levite pass the wounded man on the other side of the road. They may think that the man, whom they probably think is dead, will not lie there for long. They operate on the very civilized assumption that not every perceived need is their responsibility. They assume, in a way most of us find unsettlingly familiar, that somebody else must have this covered. Somebody must know about this problem and be working on it.

Jesus is careful to let us know that all of those who pass by the man on the road do in fact see him; but it is only the Samaritan who dares to look with care and see a human being, wounded and dying and in immediate need. Jesus was quite radical when he chose a Samaritan -

someone deeply despised by the Jewish people to be the hero of the story. Today, an analogy could be Jesus holding up a terrorist as a person who leads the way in helping us to learn holiness and goodness.

The Samaritan does the difficult task of getting a wounded man, who is either dead weight or groaning whenever the Samaritan shifts his weight, onto the donkey or camel. It is possible that the Samaritan has injured his own back in the process. It is also possible that he has had to abandon some of his baggage so that the animal can bear the new load. It is certainly probable that he has delayed his journey, perhaps at the cost of some hardship to those he serves or those he provides for.

Was this act by the Samaritan extraordinary? I think it was.

The first question the Levite and the priest most likely asked themselves was, "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me? How much will this inconvenience or cost me?" But the Samaritan reversed the question. The Samaritan did not ask, "What will happen to me if I stop to help this man?" but "What will happen to this man if I do not stop to help him?" This was why the Samaritan was extraordinary. He was great because he was willing to take a risk for humanity; he was willing to ask, "What will happen to this person?" not "What will happen to me?"

This parable isn't about stopping on the road side, it is about engaging in a relationship that will take our time and attention away from something else, it's about sacrifice and risk. A broken life by the side of the road never fits easily into our schedules. We are people in a hurry. We have jobs to do. We intend to do them well and don't want to be interrupted. Sometimes the result is that we don't see others around us clearly. And sometimes we don't see the need even in our own parents, spouse or children.

A hallmark of Jesus' ministry was his willingness to be interrupted. When the crowd tells Bartimaeus to hush, Jesus stops, hears the blind beggar's request and heals him. When the disciples protect Jesus from the onslaught of children; he beckons them closer, embracing them. Traveling from Judea to Galilee, he hears the Samaritans' request to stay and remains two full days.

Compassion means to suffer with. We actually dare to feel the same pain, or as close as we can get to the pain. True compassion upsets our plans, and leads us in unexpected directions. The message of Jesus was that compassion should be a way of life for every human being. On a number of occasions Jesus healed sufferers from leprosy, a highly infectious wasting disease that

disfigures the flesh, so contagious that its victims were quarantined in lonely places away from human society. Instead of being anxious for his own safety and immunity, we see Jesus being willing to allow them near to him and even to touch them, as he laid hands on them and healed them.

Who is my neighbor? Today, the distinction between who is my neighbor and who is a stranger has become blurred, and the reality is that we are in contact with strangers all the time. We hear their stories on the nightly news, we cross paths with them in the grocery store and at the doctor's office. We may even sit near them at church. Those whom we consider strangers are a part of our lives, more than ever before in history. When I encounter some stranger, rarely is anything expected of me beyond some simple civility, and I suppose I could choose not to engage any of them if I wanted. Not making eye contact is rather like "passing by on the other side."

Strangers, as I see it, are those persons whose lives and commitments are unknown to us. A stranger may be one who doesn't see through our eyes and who might challenge our assumptions, could shake us from our point of view. To welcome a stranger is an act of affirmation which says that we value the other, prior to any judgment about them. Welcoming a stranger is complicated.

When I see someone asking for money, I don't always know what to do. Should I give them money? Buy them a sandwich? Ignore them? While sometimes my response depends upon how much money I have with me, or whether the person asking is female or male, the truth is that I usually walk by and feel terribly guilty for doing so. Jesus teaches us that professing love is not enough; it must find expression in action. Unfortunately, our professed standards sometimes have little impact on our actions.

As Christians, we have a vocation that involves caring. Our work is not about creating a perfect world, the steep and treacherous road to Jericho still exists. Rather, our work is about making the journey toward a more whole world, a world that can see that God's blessings are the source of abundance in our lives, and these blessings are sufficient to be shared, indeed they are meant to be shared; we make the journey toward a world in which strangers, who we once felt indifferent to, can be seen as neighbors; we make the journey toward a more compassionate world in which living in relationship with God and one another is simply a way of being in the world.

Invitations and opportunities to be a helping person will always abound. Sometimes we might find ourselves asking: How much help is enough? We get tired. We're overwhelmed by the staggering number of poor people or the sense of overpowering futility – the world being too sad, murderous, and wicked to transcend. How do we wrestle with our sense of futility in the face of

disasters? What happens when we give so much help that we find ourselves experiencing “compassion fatigue?” What if I don’t feel I’m in a position, either physically, financially, or emotionally to be able to give help to someone who needs it? What do I do with the guilt I feel—or don’t feel? When do we open the door? When do we shut the door? Helping an individual one time is usually not a difficult decision to make. What about the times where someone is in chronic need of help?

We’ll never be able to respond to spontaneous needs if we feel obligated to meet them all. But Jesus hasn’t asked us to do that. He only asks us to respond to what he puts before us and encourages the rest of the body to do the same.

Helping our neighbor is **not** our job. It **is** our privilege to play the Good Samaritan role. It’s about living a life of spontaneous compassion...especially for your neighbor who is suffering. It’s about engaged a person as a person rather than a problem.

Compassion grows out of open-heartedness. And compassion is learned from those around us who invite us into their souls. If we genuinely believe that every person has inherent worth and dignity, created as a child of God, then we must – we must – practice, justice, equity, and compassion in human relations in order to protect that worth and dignity. The whole idea of compassion is based on a keen awareness of the interdependence of all these living beings, which are all part of one another and all involved in one another. When we feel that connection to the world God created all around us, when we feel a related-ness to life itself, we are greatly nourished and our humanity is expanded. And yet, we are also troubled, since one cannot feel connected with all living beings without feeling their pain.

When Jesus tells the lawyer to “go and do likewise,” he is not saying principally to go and help people in need. He is saying be with people in need, have compassion, be the kind of neighbor that allows others to know you truly love them. It’s like he said in another place at another time:

*I was hungry and you fed me. I was thirsty and you gave me to drink.
I was naked and you clothed me. I was sick and you visited me.
I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was in prison and you visited me.
I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.*

Let us all go and do likewise.