

## The Harder Question

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,  
on Sunday, July 14, 2019, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [Luke 10:25-37](#)

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The general public in the United States, regardless of religious upbringing, may know something of the stories about the birth of Jesus. An impressive number of people may know fragments of the crucifixion and resurrection stories from the Gospels. But I suspect that the one story from the Gospels that the greatest number of people from general public could accurately retell in its entirety is the story we know as the parable of the Good Samaritan. It is, after all, the only biblical story I can think of that has laws named for it.

People may not remember the exact setting for the story. And gullible tourists may pay tour guides to see the actual spot on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho where the man was mugged – forgetting that this is a story Jesus told, not an event that actually happened. Still, I think there are many people who know the story, people who've never read the Gospel of Luke or who have never gone to church.

As I've sat with this familiar parable this week, I've noticed that I sometimes cast the mugging victim as the Samaritan. He's not. The mugging victim is a Jew, just like the lawyer who was looking for a neighbor-identity loophole in the Great Commandments. I'm not sure why I sometimes do this character inversion, but I do.

Noticing this made me wonder why Jesus didn't tell the story that way in the first place. It's a more straight forward telling: Once there was a Samaritan who got mugged, beaten badly, left for dead on Jerusalem-Jericho Parkway. Important people walked by – people with cultural authority – but they didn't stop to help. No, it was a lawyer who saw the man, stopped, tended to his wounds, and took him to an inn where he could recover.

That telling would prick up the ears of the lawyer who was asking the questions. He would identify with the lawyer in the story and he would clearly get the message. You see that person at the side of the road – that person you despise (like we all do, because, you know, Samaritans)? That's the person you're supposed to love. That's what it means to love your neighbor.

For some reason, that's not the story Jesus tells. That suggests to me that Jesus may be trying to make a deeper point.

I think Jesus is saying something more than, "Those we consider our enemies are really our neighbors." (As if that wasn't deep enough.) Yes, Jesus is telling us that "everyone is a neighbor to be loved as we love ourselves, no matter how inconvenient the timing."<sup>1</sup> And, I think he's teaching us something more.

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<sup>1</sup> Laurel Rae Mathewson, "Going With Your Gut," *Sojourners*, <https://sojo.net/preaching-the-word/going-your-gut?parent=47586> (accessed 9 July 2019).

By making the Samaritan the helper and a fellow Jew the victim, Jesus is saying something about embodying love with our actions. And Jesus is saying something about accepting help, about accepting embodied love from someone else's actions – even somebody you don't like, even somebody you consider an enemy. By casting the robbery victim as a man like the person who asked the question, Jesus was tapping into empathy. The lawyer likely accepted that a fellow Jew who was the victim of an attack should be thought of as a neighbor. He could see himself in such a situation. "That could be me," he would think. And I'm supposed to accept help from a Samaritan?

If Jesus was telling me the story, the victim would be a UCC or a DOC pastor, and the person who actually helped would be Franklin Graham or Jerry Falwell, Jr. And I confess, it would be very hard for me to have either one of them as a hero in my life story.

*Compassion* literally means "suffer with." *Com* means "with" and *passion* means "suffer." The way Jesus tells the story, he invites the lawyer into compassion. The lawyer can see himself suffering there at the side of the road, so he suffers with the man who was attacked and robbed. And we end up calling the Samaritan "good" because he acted compassionately. He might have been running a Ponzi scheme the rest of the week – he *did* have money to give the innkeeper. He might have been a drunk – he *was* carrying wine. None of that matters because he had compassion for the one at the side of the road.

According to researchers, "compassion has four components: You recognize another person's suffering, are emotionally moved by it, wish the other person did not suffer and feel motivated to help relieve the suffering."<sup>2</sup>

So I've been trying to think compassionately about the people who have voiced resistance to the Housing Navigation Center over the past few months. Of late, this resistance has been not just to building a Navigation Center here in Niles, but about having one anywhere in Fremont. One of the claims made by some who oppose the navigation center is that a Navigation Center is dangerous. That claim doesn't make any logical sense to me. Our neighborhoods already have homeless people in them. If their homelessness means they are a greater danger to the population at large than housed people are (and I don't believe it does), helping them become part of the housed population would increase safety in our neighborhoods. Assuming that a random homeless person poses some sort of danger, moving that person into a program that is supervised 24/7 makes that person less of a danger.

And yet there is resistance and there is fear. I thought, perhaps, the resistance and fear may be rooted in a resistance to powerlessness.

On the 4th of July, I stopped at a convenience store in Union City to pick up some ibuprofen for a headache that was threatening to ruin the rest of the day's activities. As I stepped out of my car, a woman at the corner of the building screamed angrily. She used the word, "you," so I thought she was talking to me. It didn't take me long to realize she was yelling at someone who was there only in her own mind.

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<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Bernstein, "Find Compassion for Difficult People," *The Wall Street Journal*, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/find-compassion-for-difficult-people-1501519713> (posted 31 July 2017; accessed about that same time).

Two questions quickly raced through my mind: (1) Am I safe? and (2) Is there something I can do to help this angry, distressed woman? Though the woman's anger was scary, I decided I was safe enough. Part of that is because I'm a man who's over six feet tall and over two-hundred-more-than-i-want-to-admit pounds. I realize not everyone would immediately reach the same safety assessment. It was, nonetheless, my assessment.

The answer to my second question was, "no," and I didn't like that. I quickly realized was that her distress was causing me distress. I wanted to take away her distress – for her sake, and for my sake as well. But there was nothing I could do. Her problems were both too deep and too wide.

And I didn't like that feeling of powerlessness. Not one little bit.

Could it be that for some people, the resistance to a Navigation Center in their neighborhood is rooted in a fear of the powerlessness of not being able to help that comes when confronted with someone in distress like this? Perhaps for some people it is. And if it is, that means there is some compassion there, or at least the first part of compassion, the recognition of another person's suffering.

Living with this scripture this week has led me to wonder if there might be something else, at least for some people that leads to their resistance and fear. Perhaps the resistance to the Navigation Center is rooted in a resistance to the empathy compassion demands. Perhaps some people don't want to feel the vulnerability empathy requires. Perhaps they don't want to admit that they are but a couple paychecks away from homelessness themselves.

If this is right, then for these people, their fear is starting to make sense to me. They are afraid not of people who are homeless but of their own vulnerability empathy would require them to feel.

Theologian Ched Myers notices in this passage that the scribe gives Jesus the 'right' theory twice. In verse 27, he correctly summarizes the law and the prophets by pointing to the great commandments. And in verse 37, he correctly identifies who was neighborly to the man who was mugged. And each time, Jesus moves him from theory to practice. You've correctly identified the great commandments; do this and live. You've correctly identified who acted neighborly; go and do likewise.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus does a similar reframing of the lawyer's original question. He asks, "What must I do to inherit *eternal life*?" And when he responds to Jesus' question by quoting Scripture – love God and neighbor – Jesus says, "Do this and you will *live*."

Live. "As in now, this moment. Jesus doesn't say, 'you will inherit eternal life,' or 'live forever' or 'eternally,' or 'join me in heaven' or 'experience eternal bliss,' or any of a hundred things he could have said that would parallel the lawyer's question. Rather, he says simply, 'Do this and you will live.' Which makes me think that life – kin-dom life, life in and through the reign of God – isn't something to possess or strive for or covet or earn but is something to be, well, lived, acted out, embraced right now. To live in the kin-dom of God

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<sup>3</sup> Ched Myers, "Stories to Live By," *Sojourners*, <https://sojo.net/preaching-the-word/stories-live?parent=47586> (accessed 9 July 2019).

is to see others with compassion, to see others as fellow members of God's kin-dom and family, to see others in terms of how we are all joined by our need, our possibility, and our shared dependence on God's grace and each other."<sup>4</sup>

The problem is, being told to "go and do likewise" isn't going to make us go and do likewise. And being told that eternal life is about this moment, here, in how we embody love, isn't going to make us embody love. It is the practice of seeing the world with compassionate eyes that will make us go and do likewise.

Martin Luther King, Jr., had the profound insight that the difference between the first two who walked by the beaten man at the side of the road and the third who stopped to help was not their station in life. Yes, the first two were people with religious authority, and fellow Jews, but to see this story as a put down of them can lead to a dangerously anti-Semitic reading of this story. Jesus, who was Jewish and whose audience was Jewish, was not telling an anti-Semitic story.

No, the difference was not in their religion or economic status. The difference was in the questions they asked themselves as they traveled down this dangerous road. The first two who walked down that road after the robbery asked themselves, "If I *do* stop, what will happen to *me*?" The Samaritan asked himself, "If I *don't* stop, what will happen to *him*?"<sup>5</sup>

The Samaritan's question is the harder question to ask because it is rooted in empathy. It calls us to compassion. How we answer that question will dictate how we embody the love that is eternal life here and now.

Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> David Lose, "Pentecost 5 C: What the Good Samaritan Teaches us About God," *In the Meantime ...*, <https://www.davidlose.net/2019/07/pentecost-5-c-what-the-good-samaritan-teaches-us-about-god/> (posted and accessed 12 July 2019). "Kingdom" changed to "kin-dom" and in one spot the typo "it" was changed to "is."

<sup>5</sup> Quoted more exactly from King's urging of pastors and laypeople to support the striking sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee, by Bill Wylie-Kellermann in "The Power of Alliance," *Sojourners*, <https://sojo.net/preaching-the-word/power-alliance?parent=47586> (accessed 9 July 2019).