

Compassion

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, October 11, 2026, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [Luke 10:25-37](#) and [Mark 6:30-44](#)

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I want to begin with a 30-second commercial from the Interfaith Alliance.

<https://youtu.be/uCFdG1WroUw>

Luke is my favorite of the gospels. There are several reasons why. One of those reasons is that it has the parable of the Good Samaritan. This may well be the best-known story from the gospels. As far as I know, it's the only story in the gospels that has a law named after it. Good Samaritan laws offer legal protection to people who give assistance to those who are injured or ill. The hope is that this protection will reduce a bystander's hesitation to assist when it's needed.

The story is so well known that 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.

In Jesus' telling of the story, the mugging victim is a Jew, just like the legal expert who was looking for a neighbor-identity loophole in the Great Commandments. If I was telling the story, I probably would have reversed the primary roles. 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. Then this lawyer came by, 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 legal expert 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. And caring for someone who's suffering is how you 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, "Even those we consider our enemies are 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."¹

And, I think he's teaching us something more. By making a fellow Jew the victim and the Samaritan the helper, 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,

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

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 Lauren Boebert or Pete Hegseth or some other Christo-nationalist. And I confess, it would be very hard for me to have someone like that 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."²

On the 4th of July seven years ago, 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 my day. 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 yelling at me. It didn't take me long to realize she was yelling at someone who was there only in her own mind.

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 two-hundred-and-more-than-I-want-to-admit pounds. I realize not everyone would immediately reach the same safety assessment. It was, nonetheless, my assessment in that moment.

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.

My compassion was present. I was able to recognize this person's suffering. I was emotionally moved by it – to the point that her distress was causing me distress. I wanted to diminish her suffering – yes, partly for my own sake, though mostly because I wanted

² 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).

her to not suffer. I felt motivated to help relieve her suffering – I just couldn't figure out how. The compassion was there, though not the tools to harness the compassion.

This memory came back to me because I've been wondering what gets in the way of compassion. It's one thing to be unable to act on the compassion when the compassion is present. It's something else when the compassion isn't even there. And I *think* – though I don't know of any social science to back this up – I *think* the thing that frequently gets in the way of compassion is resistance to the empathy compassion demands. Empathy requires a degree of vulnerability, and we live in a culture that resists acknowledging and feeling vulnerable. Generally speaking, people don't want to feel their own suffering, a necessary part of empathy, which is a core component of compassion.

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*?"³

The Samaritan's question is the harder question to ask because it is rooted in empathy. It calls us to compassion. And it calls us to be courageous.

The story from Mark's gospel about the feeding of the multitude is a story that begins with compassion. "When Jesus arrived and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd." Later, as it gets to supper time, the disciples suggest that Jesus send them home so they can get something to eat. The scripture is silent about the disciples' motivation, which certainly could have been compassion. "It's not going to be long before they're hungry, Jesus. You really need to send them home now."

Jesus' response was empowering. "You give them something to eat." When they told him they only had five loaves of bread and two fish, he told them that was enough to make a difference. Because they started with compassion, they had enough to make a difference.

We are calling this worship series, "The Changemakers." We are inviting you to think about yourself as a changemaker. And today, I want you to think about this: All changemaking begins with compassion." Compassion, empathy, mercy – this is the starting place of transforming the world.

Amen.

³ 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).