



## WON'T YOU BE MY NEIGHBOR?

Micah 6:6-8; Luke 10:25-37

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Jesus has a way of turning things upside down and inside out. A teacher of the law asks Jesus the simple question, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus responds by telling the parable of the Good Samaritan which ends with its own question. Jesus asks, “Who acted like the neighbor to the man who fell among thieves?” The story itself also follows an unexpected pattern. In the manner of such stories, one would have expected the priest or the Levite, who were part of the religious establishment, would do the right thing. Of course, the surprise of the parable is that a despised Samaritan appears in the story. He acts with compassion after the priest and the Levite have passed by the half-dead man in the ditch. When Jesus reframes the question to ask who acted like the neighbor, the teacher of the law cannot even utter the word “Samaritan,” but simply says, “The one who showed mercy.”

We have lost all sense of the scandal of calling a Samaritan good. In fact, the phrase *Good Samaritan* is so embedded in our culture that it has become a part of everyday language. We give out Good Samaritan awards, name hospitals that offer charitable care “Good Samaritan hospitals,” and even have Good Samaritan laws; laws that aim to protect people whose well-intentioned efforts in a crisis situation may have unintended, unfortunate results. The Good Samaritan is the one who shows compassion.

In the English language, compassion is a noun, but it ought to be a verb. In fact, it is both in the original Greek. Jesus says that when the Samaritan came to the man who had been beaten, robbed, stripped, and left for dead by robbers, the Samaritan felt compassion for him. There were no clothes to identify the man’s status, nationality, or religion; he couldn’t even be sure the man was still alive. Jesus tells us that the Samaritan went to him, bound his wounds, poured oil and wine on his bruised flesh, set him on his donkey, took him to an inn, cared for him, took out coins, gave the money to the innkeeper, and came back to check on him and settle accounts. Compassion looks like a series of small but concrete actions that heal and restore life; actions that break down boundaries that divide people. True faith is active, concrete, and fits the need of the situation. The prophet Micah expresses the essence of life before God in a series of verbs: to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God. Compassion is a noun, but in the grammar of the gospel, it ought to be a verb.

Compassion is one of the great attributes of Jesus in the scriptures. He embodies the compassion of God. Three of the twelve uses of the word “compassion” in the New Testament refer to Jesus’ compassion for those with particular needs. Jesus has compassion on the blind, the leper, and a grieving mother. Five times, the gospels tell us that when Jesus sees the hungry and scattered crowds, he has compassion on them and feeds them. We see his compassion when he weeps for Lazarus and when he cries out from the cross, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” The word is used in three parables: this parable of the Good Samaritan, the parable of the Prodigal Son, and the parable of the King who forgives a servant’s enormous debt. In these three parables, we have signs of God’s compassion displayed in human actions.

Bernard Brandon Scott has noted that the parables invite us to see a new world that is characterized by God's activity and God's vision rather than the limited and diminished ways we humans tend to see things. Like the teacher of the law, we dissect the definition of neighbor so that we can define our obligations and opportunities as narrowly as possible. Meanwhile, Jesus blows a hole as big as Texas in our carefully constructed defenses against helping others. Scott writes that Jesus envisions "a new world in which the wall between *us* and *them* no longer exists and even more that one of *them* can come to the aid of one of *us*" (p. 64, *Re-Imagine the World*). We want to avoid vulnerability, but the gospel makes us vulnerable to others. We cannot seal ourselves off from others and claim to follow Jesus. We tend to ask, "Who deserves it?", but Jesus asks, "Who does it?"

The parable invites us to start not with philosophical questions about who is our neighbor, but with concrete actions in response to the neighbor whose needs are right before us. When we wonder what we should do in a particular situation, the more appropriate question is, "What needs doing?" If we want to share the gospel of Christ, then we meet others at the point of their need.

In the small church and community in which we began our ministry, we witnessed time and again how the community gathered together to help their neighbors in times of crisis. When the local plant laid off workers, food would appear on front porches and money would be slipped through the mail slot; a broken-down car would be fixed; an old man's home would be repaired and painted. A few days after we moved to town, my father died. When we came back to town from the funeral, the manse was clean, the kitchen packed with food, the yard freshly mowed. Concrete acts that were visible signs of the compassion of God and hardly a word was spoken.

If we want to live in the kingdom then we can't ignore the neighbor before us no matter what culture, race, religion, or class. In our global society, we find that people we once considered strangers may be the ones who live next door, attend our schools, clean our streets, and work in our offices. With modern technology and communication, the needs of a neighbor half-way around the world may seem as close to home as the school, shop, or house around the corner.

Years ago, when we returned to that same small town in which we began our ministry, some things were the same and some things had changed. It was exciting to see the church thriving and doing the things that it had always done well: caring for one another, gathering for worship, and nurturing the faith. The community had changed. Once Latino migrant laborers came and went with the growing seasons. Now the area had many Latino residents, school children, and stores, churches, and restaurants with signs in Spanish. The same spirit of caring for neighbors continues, only now walls have fallen and black and white, Anglo and Latino live together in one community and practice the grammar of compassion.

Such an expansive redefinition of neighbor invites compassion fatigue. How can I care for everyone whose need is known to me? Sometimes we get so overwhelmed that we don't even start doing the things we can do. The parable teaches us to begin where we can with what we have. The parable invites us to take the small steps of compassion. It is not the grand gesture that counts, but going to the one in need, binding the wounds, pouring the oil and wine, caring for

the need, giving what we have to give, and setting the one in need on the right path to health and wholeness.

We have some neighbors who need our help. These are the women in our community who have been released from prison and who are making a new start. They need reliable transportation to go to work, classes, and appointments. This Witness Season, our gifts will enable Angles Charge Ministry to purchase a van to help these women out of the ditch and on the road to new life. A small gift by us will make a huge difference in the lives of others. More than that, Angels Charge is making the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, or, should I say, the road from prison to a more abundant life a better, safer road to travel. They are not only helping our neighbors get out of the ditch, but they are also figuring out how to get rid of the ditches that trap our neighbors in need.

The parable is about what happens on a journey from Jerusalem to Jericho or what happens on any road we travel. It is about people of faith and vision who have a glimpse of God's kingdom where barriers are broken down and people share the gifts and talents that are needed. It is about big-hearted people who refuse to turn away from those in need. It about you and me who have learned the grammar of compassion. It happens, one small act, one small step, at a time.