

Daring to Draw Near

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Luke 10:25-27

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" **26** He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" **27** He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." **28** And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

29 But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" **30** Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. **31** Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. **32** So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. **33** But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. **34** He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. **35** The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' **36** Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" **37** He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

ONE CAME NEAR

Two holy men, the Levite and the priest, saw the man lying in the ditch by the side of the road. He was beaten and half-dead.

But, they didn't come near.
They passed by on the other side.

The Samaritan was different.
When he saw the broken man by the side of the road, he came near.

Of course, the Samaritan did some other things as well.

He treated the broken man's wounds.
He put him on his animal and took him to an inn and paid the innkeeper for his care.

And yet, none of this would have happened if the Samaritan hadn't come near.

DON'T COME NEAR!

We call this the parable of the Good Samaritan.
But, in Jesus' day Samaritans were not known for being good.

They were bad, very bad.

As far as the Jews were concerned, their theology was as corrupt as their morals.

The Samaritans and the Jews were separated by fear and mistrust.
(If they had had the money, the Jews would have probably built a wall between Judaea and Samaria!)

The Jews made it a point to stay far away from these infidels. And for the Samaritans, the feeling was mutual.

We know about people being separated by fear and anger. It's in the news every day.

What is the answer to the problems that face us?
The world tells us,
"Walk by on the other side.
Create a barrier between them and us."

The world tells us,
"Don't you dare cross over to the other side.
It's too dangerous."

DARING TO DRAW NEAR

There is some truth to that message.
It is dangerous to cross over to the other side.

The broken man by the side of the road could have been a trap set by the robbers.

The Samaritan could have suffered the same fate as the man who had been mugged.

But, despite the danger, this Samaritan did something remarkable.

He came near.

He decreased the distance between himself and the man who needed help.
And that made all the difference.

Why was the Good Samaritan good?

I would say that he was good because he dared to draw near.

In a broken and dangerous world, the Samaritan found the courage to draw near and show mercy.

SALVATION

Our lesson for today begins with a lawyer asking Jesus a question,
“What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

As we might put it today, “How can I be saved?”

Jesus said, “What does the Bible say?”

The lawyer knew the answer.

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind.
And love your neighbor as yourself.”

And Jesus replied,

“Right answer.

Do this, and you will live.”

There’s the rub.

It's one thing to know the right answer.
It's quite another to do this, to put it into practice.

THE LIMITS OF LOVE

Love has it's limits after all.
And this lawyer wanted to define the limits of love.

He asked,
"Exactly who is my neighbor?"

If we don't set some boundaries can be overwhelmed by the needs of the world. Right?

In order to save ourselves we have to protect ourselves. We have to set limits. Right?

That seems logical.
But, suppose the opposite is true.

Suppose we find salvation not in restricting our definition of neighbor but by expanding it?
What if we find salvation not by walking by on the other side but by daring to draw near?

In a frightening and truly dangerous world, how can we do this?
We certainly cannot do it on our own.
We need help. We need divine intervention.

GOD DRAWS NEAR

Fortunately, we have it.
The Bible tells us that God was in Christ.
God first came near to us when he sent his son into the world.

God in Christ loved us so much that he even risked his own safety in order to draw near.
The incarnation was an act of divine courage.
When you draw near people who are afraid and angry you expose yourself to danger.

That was true for God's Son.

Fearful people, people who were not all that different from us, crucified Jesus, God's Son.

But, crucifixion was not the end of the story.

Through the grace of God the death of Jesus became an opportunity for resurrection.

Instead of tearing people apart, through the work of the Spirit the death and resurrection of Jesus brought people together.

Look at what happened at Pentecost.

Rich and poor, slave and free, and people from all over the ancient world came together and learned to speak a common language.

It was the language of grace and forgiveness.

THE CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO VIOLENCE

This past year has been filled with unspeakable tragedy.

Each week seems to bring another outrageous act of violence.

This week was certainly no different.

The response is predictable.

Many will use the violence as a reason to assign blame.

And of course this only drives us farther apart and increases the tension in a divided world.

But, the church is called to respond to violence in a different way.

You see, the church looks at these tragedies through the lens of grace.

The death and resurrection of Jesus brought people together. The early church formed by the power of the Spirit was a diverse community filled with love and hope and costly care.

And this is still who we are called to be.

The church is called by God to bring people together in this time of polarization and fear.

When everyone else is backing away and casting blame, Christians are called to come near.

Christians are called to do the *costly things* that are necessary for real healing to occur.

Remember, the Samaritan not only drew near to the man who was broken and bloodied;
he continued to bring healing to the situation by using his money to make things better.

It is estimated by some commentators that the money the Samaritan gave the innkeeper amounted to two months salary for a working man.

It cost the Samaritan a lot to come near.
It cost the Samaritan a lot to show mercy.

So, what will reconciliation cost us?
What will it take for us to come near in a world that is determined to push us apart?

COURAGE

The first thing it takes to draw near in an age of violence is courage.

Often we respond to acts of violence with angry words and sometimes angry actions.

At first this may make us feel strong and courageous.

But, upon closer examination these actions do not show that we are strong.

These actions show that we are weak.

These actions separate us.

Those actions cause us to walk by on the other side.

Tragedy is intensified by intemperate language and injustice.

When we ignore injustice and use harsh language, not only do we leave the broken one by the side of the road; we also create fertile ground for even more violence.

Just as God in Christ drew near to us in love, let us draw near to others in love.

This still requires courage and faith.

The Bible tells us that a “soft answer turns away wrath but a harsh word stirs up anger.” (Proverbs 15:1)

We have far too many harsh words in our world, words that stir up anger.

Christians are called to develop the gift of the “soft answer.” This is the measure of true courage in a broken world.

THE PRICE OF SALVATION

The second thing required to draw near to those who are broken is to pay the price of reconciliation.

What is the cost of our salvation?

How are we reconciled to God?

How are we saved?

We are saved by the body and the blood of Christ.

We say it each month at communion.

This is the body of Christ broken for us.

This is the blood of Christ shed for us.

The Bible tells us that Christ died for us.

Jesus not only had the courage to draw near and confront injustice and hypocrisy with the liberating word of God; he also was willing to pay the ultimate price for his actions ...

He was willing to die for the sins of the world.

He was crucified by people he loved and had come to save.

He took the ultimate injustice upon his own mortal body in order to bring eternal hope to the world.

THE PRICE WE PAY

If Jesus is our example, what does this mean for us?

At the very least it means that we are called to humble ourselves.

We are called to sacrifice pride and self-righteousness so that we can draw near to those broken ones ...

broken ones who are on the other side of the road, the other side of the tracks
and even on the other side of the world.

The Bible also tells us that Jesus died for the sins of *the world* and so our concern cannot be limited just to neighbors who are nearby. The mercy and compassion of Christ are not limited by geography.

Neighbor is not defined by proximity but by need.
And like the Samaritan we have to put our money where our mouth is.

God's love is expensive.

In our lesson for today, Jesus asked the lawyer what the Scriptures required for eternal life.
The lawyer knew the answer.

The ten commandments are divided into two sections.

The first section deals with loving God.
And the second section deals with loving neighbor.

Salvation is found when we put those together, when we love God *and* we love neighbor.

But, it's not just something we say.
It's something that we do.
Love is an action.

Jesus told this lawyer whose theology was perfect,

“You’re right.

You can summarize the Bible in this way.

Love God. Love neighbor.

Do this, and you will be saved.”

Do this.

Put this into practice.

In other words, right theology demands right action.

And the parable of the Good Samaritan makes it clear how the love of God is to be put into practice.

It means binding up wounds.

It means bringing people to places of safety.

It means paying for the cost of care.

It means coming near not only at the time of tragedy but also coming back to make sure that the person has been truly healed.

THE TRIAL OF A STONE

Long ago a traveler was walking through the jungles of Burma when he came upon a small village. The sun was going down, and he decided to just sleep along the roadside and enter the village the next morning.

He took his coin purse from around his neck, found a nearby stone and hid his purse so no one would take it as he slept.

But, as it turns out a villager spotted him hiding that purse.

Late at night as the traveler slept, the villager returned and stole the purse. When the traveler awoke, he found that the money was gone.

And so he sat down by the road and began to weep.

A crowd began to gather.

They were curious about this traveler weeping at the edge of town.

And before long the mayor of the village joined the crowd and asked what had happened.

The traveler told his sad story.
And then the mayor said,
“Can you show me the stone?”

The traveler walked a short distance and showed him a round stone about the size of man’s head.

The mayor cried out,
“Arrest that stone!
Bring that thief to the town square.
I’m going to convene a court.”

They followed the mayor’s odd request and carried the stone to the town square.
Once the elders were in place, the eccentric mayor convened the court.

He asked the stone,
“What is your name?”

The stone was ... well stone-faced!

But, the mayor was not finished.
He continued his interrogation of this rock as he leaned forward and said,
“Where did you come from?”

No answer.

“Well at least tell me your age.”
More silence.

The villagers were baffled by their mayor’s strange actions.
Some begin to smile.

But, the mayor just intensified his interrogation of the stone. He pushed his face close to the stone and delivered a barrage of questions,

“So, you don’t want to speak up?”

Tell me, why were you loitering outside of our village?
Were you looking for trouble?"

The bizarre actions of the mayor stirred muffled laughter from the villagers.
But, the mayor turned toward them and growled,

"Show some respect.
This is a court of law."

The chastened crowd settled down, and the mayor once again turned his
attention toward the stone.

He said,
"Since you will not answer my questions, I am going to hold you in con-
tempt of court.
In punishment, you will receive thirty lashes with a stick."

This was too much.
The crowd burst out into uncontrolled laughter.

But, the mayor was not amused.
He turned toward the crowd once again and with fire in his eyes said,

"Have you no respect for the court?
I fine all of you a coin a piece."

Now the mayor might have been crazy, but he was not a man to be trifled
with.
So, the villagers all came forward and dutifully dropped a coin in the bowl in
front of the mayor.

And then the mayor gave the coins to the traveler.
And he apologized for the crime that had been committed outside his vil-
lage.

The traveler's eyes were once again filled with tears.
But, this time they were tears of joy.
What he had lost had been restored.

And then the mayor ordered that the stone be placed back by the edge of town where it rested before.

This unusual trial was talked about for some time.
Some thought the mayor was crazy, but most thought he acted with great wisdom.

And every time the villagers walked past the stone, they were reminded of a great truth.
They were all called to share each other's burdens and also the burdens of everyone who passed their way.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is like that stone.

It is a reminder that God does not call us to be bystanders in life.
God calls us to come near.

Jesus, after telling this parable, asked the lawyer,
"Which one of these acted like a neighbor?"

The lawyer replied,
"The one who showed mercy."

And Jesus said,
"Go and do likewise."

I wonder what mercy might look like today?
Jesus still challenges us as he challenged a lawyer long ago,

"Go and do likewise."

In a world that pushes us apart, God in Christ dares us to draw near.

Amen.