

Radical Hospitality
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Luke 10:25-37
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I am terrified of flying. Takeoffs and landings are the worst. I used to take Dramamine; its sedative properties helped to soften the edges of my fear; it worked, but it made me a sleepy traveling companion. So now I read short stories, which not only keep me distracted, but I stay alert, because I never know when the cabin will lose pressure, and I'll need to place that oxygen mask over my nose and mouth and breathe normally.

Do we ever tire of stories? How many of us grew up listening to bedtime stories or tales told by our grandparents of their youth? For me, the best part of *Prairie Home Companion* is when Garrison Keillor weaves a monologue about life in Lake Wobegon. I am transported, entertained, and sometimes I even learn a wry truth about life.

Jesus understood our love of stories...his best teaching was through his stories, his parables. In preparing for today, I learned that there are about 40 parables in the New Testament. Some are straightforward, others are perplexing, and still others have quite a bite. Most of the parables are in Luke...which is where we find the Parable of the Good Samaritan, this story of the aftermath of a roadside mugging.

Isn't this the best known and best loved parable?

Just look around our community to see where it has comfortably taken root: we have the Good Samaritan Society, which offers nursing and hospice care, the Good Samaritan retirement home on Hilyard Street. Oregon has Good Samaritan laws which are designed to protect most professional rescuers from the risk of legal action as long as they act in good faith. Our church offers a Good Samaritan fund, which distributes monies for gas, rent, bus tickets for people in need. No questions asked.

We know this story, don't we? A traveler on the road is beaten, robbed and left for dead. A priest and a Levite, very devout men, come down the road. They do not stop to help. Rather, it is the Samaritan, the despised enemy, who stops and cares for the stranger. We already know the moral of this parable. Is there anything new to be learned?

Well, I chose it for today's sermon, so I hope so. Let's try diving into this parable together, and perhaps we'll discover something fresh and maybe even surprising.

It's Sunday morning, and we are all sitting in the Wheeler room for an Adult Education class. Imagine that we have never heard the parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus is our guest teacher. We watch as one of the smartest members of our congregation stands and asks, "So, Jesus, how can I be sure I belong to the family of God?"

Jesus looks him in the face and responds by asking, "You know your Bible; what do you think?" The man with confidence says, "Love the Lord your God, and, oh yes, love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus smiles, and nods with a "You bet."

We settle into our seats, comfortable with the exchange so far....all familiar ground. Who could disagree with the idea of loving our neighbor?

The questioner sits down, but then quickly pops up again, “Excuse me, Jesus, but how would you define ‘neighbor’?”

Jesus takes a breath and tells a story. He describes a crime – one where a traveler on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho is waylaid by robbers, beaten, stripped of his clothes, and is left in a pool of blood. Hmmmm, we know about that road, we know of its dangers and wonder why on earth anyone would travel it alone. What was he thinking?

Jesus takes another breath and tells us that a priest comes along, sees the beaten man, crosses over the road and hurries on by. Then a Levite spies the victim, and he urges his donkey into a trot and crosses over to the other side of the road. Well, we think to ourselves, that seems understandable...after all, there are cultural taboos that prevented the priest and the Levite from touching blood or a dead body. And maybe they were running late for truly critical appointments. Besides, surely they sent others to rescue the man, once they reached their destinations.

Jesus continues his story. A third traveler rides along, a Samaritan. He stops and walks toward the man, bends over him. He takes the oil and wine from his saddlebags and dresses the man’s wounds, wraps him in his cloak, struggles to lift and place him securely on his donkey. He leads him to a safe place, an inn that he knows about, speaks to the innkeeper, and pays for his upkeep until the man recovers and is able to continue his journey.

We sit in silence, turning this parable over in our minds. A Samaritan is the hero? Impossible. We’ve been taught that Samaritans are inferior people...they read only part of the Bible, they worship outdoors, on the tops of hills, and don’t go to Jerusalem. Even their money is contaminated.

Jesus couldn’t have chosen a more radical hero.

This Samaritan has the face of an enemy and a heart full of hospitality. He rescues a helpless victim without knowing his name, economic status, political connections, or religious affiliation. What makes him a “good” Samaritan is how he responds to a needy human being unconditionally.

Dr. Martin Luther King wrote about this parable. “I understood what those first two were thinking when they passed by. This is a dangerous place. Look what happened to him – he looks like he is dead. The first two said, ‘If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?’ But then the Samaritan looked upon him, and he reversed the question, he thought, ‘If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?’

Perhaps you, like me, can identify with the priest and the Levite. When I’m racing to a meeting that I am chairing, and I see a woman slumped in her wheelchair on the sidewalk...but the light is green, the car behind me might stop, I can’t use my cell phone – I’ll get a ticket, I know, I’ll ask Sarah to call 911 when I get to church.

Or can we identify with the victim? What is it like to be rescued, to be cared for with such love?

I asked my Bible study group and dear friends to share their stories of when they experienced unexpected hospitality. Here are a few.

She is pregnant, unemployed, and homeless. From thousands of miles away a warm invitation arrives – come home, we want you here with us, we have made room for you.

The couple arrives in an unfamiliar town, exhausted from a long journey. A complete stranger offers to drive them to their destination. "No," he says, "please don't pay me; pay it forward."

You are in a deep depression, you don't want to see any of your friends and loved ones. But a neighbor you know only casually comes over and spends an hour just rubbing your feet. No talking is needed.

Molly has Down's syndrome. She and her mother are shopping in a very crowded mall. The mother notices a young woman pushing her child in an adapted wheel chair. The child, a girl about her daughter's age, is obviously developmentally and physically disabled. She has a very solemn expression on her face –almost sad. People stream past them and most seemed obviously uncomfortable, avoiding looking at the child. Then Molly, as soon as she sees them, marches right up to the girl and said "Hi! My name is Molly. What's your name?" The girl squeals with true delight; she can't answer Molly in words but her face says it all.

All these stories...about families and strangers offering hospitality, unexpectedly, warmly, spontaneously.

And I have a story to share. On Wednesday of this week, a groundbreaking ceremony was held in Springfield to mark the start of construction of Afiya Apartments, a project conceived and nurtured by Brethren Community Services. The apartments will provide safe, secure, decent housing for adults with psychiatric disabilities.

I represent our church on the Board of Directors for BCS, along with members of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Springfield, Springfield Church of the Brethren, Eugene Mennonite Church, ShelterCare and a mental health professional from Lane County. For the past five years we have dreamed, planned, raised funds, made presentations, applied for grants, revised plans, and inched our way forward to make this housing project a reality.

On Wednesday, I stood there at the groundbreaking ceremony, teary eyed with a bursting heart, hugging my Board members and the many friends of this project. I listened to speakers from our Congressional delegation, City of Springfield and the federal government speak passionately about expanding our understanding of who are our neighbors, and the prophetic call to treat every human being with compassion and justice.

In a year's time, when the apartments are constructed, a dedication ceremony will be held. Soon after that, sixteen adults who have been broken and battered by psychiatric illness and are now on the way to wellness, will move into the apartments, supported by ShelterCare. I don't know these future residents, but I think they will need hospitality just like the rest of us. If hospitality is a hallmark of the kingdom of God, then might our church family be willing to develop a caring personal relationship with these residents. What would that look like? What would we have to give up and what would we gain to live as neighbors in God's realm?

I wonder what the victim of the mugging thought when he woke up and learned that his life had been saved by a stranger, perhaps someone he would have despised, someone he may not have stopped to help. Did this experience change him? Jesus doesn't tell us.

But I like to think that he was changed. I like to think that, lying in his bed at the inn, he marveled at his rescue, and that he got to know the Samaritan, that they shared meals, and traveled onto Jericho together when he grew stronger. That he shared his experience with his family, with his Bible study group, with his neighbors. One thing I'm sure of is that he considered who his neighbors were in an entirely new way.

I'm sure you have your own "Good Sam" story....when you have been ambushed by robbers sometimes of your own creation. And how shocked you were by experiences of healing compassion... encounters of unexpected hospitality. How were you transformed?

I believe that we are all on the road to Jericho. And, at various times, we all run into trouble along the way. We need the spontaneous kindness of the Good Samaritan, that experience of radical hospitality from the heart that changes us so profoundly. It makes us look at the world differently.

Jesus tells us we can't assume that some people are our neighbors and some are not. Everybody and anyone is our neighbor to be loved.

Let's go back into the Wheeler Room where Jesus is wrapping up the class. He asks: "Which of the three, the priest, the Levite, or the Samaritan, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" We know the answer. We reply quietly: "The one who showed compassion." Jesus closes our time together by telling us "Go and do likewise."