

Radical Love in the Neighborhood  
Luke 10: 25-37

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One of my most meaningful opportunities for ministry came to me in Crestwood, Kentucky where I served for nine years as a member of the Community Rescue Squad, as well as pastor of the Methodist church. A little group of volunteers, trained as EMT's, provided this community service. When we inquired about our legal liability, we were informed that we were protected by the Good Samaritan Law. Since then, I've discovered most states and many countries have a Good Samaritan Law. The Good Samaritan Law, in essence, protects from blame those who choose to aid others who are injured or ill. In Canada, it's a requirement. In France, the photographers at the scene of Princess Diana's fatal car accident were investigated for violation of the Good Samaritan Law. Indeed, there is a Good Samaritan Law in Tennessee, although my attorney warns me not to practice law from the pulpit for he will be listening. If the greatest story ever told is the story of the Prodigal Son, then Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan is close behind it.

Come, let's take a look. When an expert attorney cross-examined Jesus about the nature of neighborliness, Jesus answered with a story. A certain man was making the twenty mile trip from Jerusalem to Jericho when he fell into the hands of robbers. The criminals not only robbed the man, they stripped him of his clothes, beat him half to death and left him on the road known as the Bloody Way. A priest happened to be going down the same road. When he saw the man he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he saw the man, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled along, came to where the man was. He saw him, had compassion for him, administered first aid, used his own donkey as an ambulance and took him to an inn where he took care of him. If that was not enough, the Samaritan paid the innkeeper two days wages in advance and promised to reimburse him for any other expenses when he returned. And Jesus concludes "*Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?*"

**NEED IS OUR NEIGHBOR.** Who is my neighbor? The one who had mercy; the person NEARBY. In my family of origin, we didn't have much wealth, but we did have good neighbors. They were the "Young's." They lived right across the road from us, the "Olds." That's the truth.

As a kid I spent more time at their house than I did mine. They had a television and we did not. They played cards and we were not allowed such fun. Good neighbors look out for each other. Years later, when my father fell on the ice at the barn and broke his hip, our neighbors came to his rescue. One year later when he did the exact same thing, our neighbors were there again. People need good neighbors. I used to be a better neighbor to those close by than I am now; this

story makes we wonder why?

A neighbor is the person in NEED. When you and I read this story, we are shocked by the priest and Levite who pass by on the other side. The first readers would have been shocked by the Samaritan who stopped to help. Assuming the beaten man was a Jew, we need to be reminded that Jews hated Samaritans. The only Good Samaritan is a dead Samaritan said the bigots of the day. When the lawyer is asked to name the neighbor all he can say is: *"The one who had mercy on him."*

Here is the point of the story. Neighbors are not defined by race, by religion, by economics, or by geography. A good neighbor is the person who had mercy on the man in need.

Here is my observation. The great discrimination of our day is not by race or religion. The great division of our day is along the lines of economics and social status. Discrimination today is between the "haves" and the "have-nots." So, we build our homes in gated communities to keep the unwanted out. Sometimes it causes me to wonder: Have we not also fenced ourselves in?

**COMPASSION IS OUR MOTIVATION.** *"When he saw him, he was moved with compassion."* Compassion begins with eyes that see. The priest, the Levite, and the Samaritan all travel the same road, only the Samaritan sees. He sees not a Jew, a Muslim, a Christian, a Hispanic, a protestant, a catholic, a straight, a gay; he sees a man, a man in need.

Compassion does not require heroic gestures of self-denial, just ordinary sensitivity in everyday living. The Samaritan did not set out that day to rescue the perishing. We do not need to imitate Mother Theresa. We just need eyes to see the needs around us. Wherever we go, whatever we do, there are people in pain.

Some are left half-dead on the highways of life.

Some are teenagers in our own home who feel insecure.

Some are families next door who are existing, not loving.

Some are executives whom you think have it made, but deep down are the loneliest people in the world.

Compassion is a heart that cares. Compassion is not a political announcement; it's a personal concern. Compassion is not a public debate; it's a soul that feels. Thomas Merton said, "Compassion is the keen awareness of the interdependence of all things." *When Jesus saw the multitudes he had compassion on them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd.* Paul says, *"Clothe yourselves with compassion"* (Colossians 3:12). Desmond Tutu says, "If you are going to be compassionate, be ready for action."

**LOVE IS OUR ACTION.** He binds his wounds, gives him some pain medicine, puts him on his own animal, brings him to an inn, and takes care of him. Love is PERSONAL. It is one thing to herald the dawn of a new earth, it is quite another to lend our hands to the binding of a present wound. It is one thing to hold a

conference on hunger; it is another to feed the homeless. It is one thing for denominations to pass resolutions about health care in Tennessee. It is another thing for pastors to raise their out-of-pocket deductibles and open clinics with the savings. We can complain about the response time of 911, or we can learn to administer CPR.

Love is COSTLY, down right expensive. So this Samaritan stops in his tracks, drops his plans, scrubs his itinerary, gives his wine, lends his donkey, shares his money and takes his time. What part of love don't we understand? The attorney knew the answer before he asked the question. You can't define love; you can only give it away. Yes, it's inconvenient; it will always be costly. A neighbor is not a definition; a neighbor is a person.

Yes, you have to find the balance. He eventually hands the man over to the innkeeper, but still he pays. He does what he can. He gives what he has and that is being a good neighbor.

I don't know about you, but I get uneasy when God gets direct. I was sitting in my office pounding away on this sermon Friday afternoon when the phone rang. It was a person in need of a night's lodging. Such requests are not unusual for the church to receive and with your help, we normally respond to such needs, but such requests seldom get to me. I don't even have access to our system. So, I put the guy off, told him to call somebody else; I felt sure they would help. After all, I had a sermon to preach, a wedding to conduct and a funeral needing preparation. So, in a matter of seconds I was off the phone and back working on my sermon.

Then it hit me. You hypocrite. I tried to go back, but I had no phone number, only the name of a total stranger. I was caught, caught in my own callousness without a means of escape. I did the only thing I could do; I asked for mercy. I didn't rationalize that I had helped others last week from my own pocket, or led a meeting that will one day invigorate a neighborhood. I just had to say, "Lord, I blew it; I am the priest and the Levite all rolled into one. Have mercy and help me do better."

Do you ever need to pray like that?

Amen.