

Well, you may have heard this story. Several years ago, a conference was organized for Christian pastors to attend. It was based on the theme of mercy and the parable of the good Samaritan, that we just read. What the pastors didn't know, is the conference organizers had planted a broken-down vehicle with a stranded stranger, who need help along the route that led to the conference center.

Dozens of pastors whizzed by the stranded stranger all afternoon. Some were anxious to get to the conference early and enjoy the pool. While others were simply running late and didn't want to miss the beginning. Ironically, not a single one of them stopped. You can imagine their surprise when they learned about the setup later in the conference.

More recently, a similar test, I found out, was given to a group of seminarians. They were all told that they had an immediate interview for a potential job offer, and that the interviewer highly prized promptness.

Each seminarian had to walk quickly across campus to reach the office for the interview on time. But, a woman was planted along their route, who appeared injured and in need of help. What do you think happened? Once again, none of the seminarians stopped to help her, passing her by in such a rush, they probably didn't even notice her.

Well, we hear these stories, and we ask ourselves whether we would do the same. I hate to admit it, but if I'm honest, I think on most days I would probably do the same thing. I would pass by.

I knew I could get in such a rush that I don't even notice anyone or anything but what's on my own personal agenda and radar. While I think this is a sad symptom of our busy and individualistic culture, our hurried pace, something I talked about last week, it's not the main point behind the parable of the good Samaritan.

There is actually something much deeper going on here in this incredible parable. When the lawyer in our gospel, who was of course a learned expert in the law, asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. Notice that Jesus responds with a question. "What is written in the law?"

Jesus often responds to questions with a question, as you'll probably notice. I find that happens prayer as well. But, he does this especially when he knows he's being tested by the questioner. The lawyer actually gives him a pretty good response. An excellent response maybe. He quotes from Deuteronomy.

He says, "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." Jesus responds with a classic rabbinic answer. He says, "You have given the right answer. Go, do this, and you will live."

But the lawyer isn't satisfied, and perhaps he wants to justify himself. He asks Jesus a follow up question, "Who is my neighbor?" He's probably hoping for a more narrow definition. I mean, all of us are hoping for that. But you can almost imagine the mental smile Jesus got at that moment, because he knew now they were really getting into it.

Somewhere, they were getting somewhere, on this theological inquiry, beyond the surface. At that time, according to tradition, one's neighbor was defined to include either a fellow Israelite, or any gentile who had come to live within the Jewish community.

But this traditional answer is not the one that Jesus provides. Jesus is constantly opening up doors and ideas, right? Doors most of us are not even sure we want opened up, or that we like being opened. Jesus is always really pushing us, as listeners, pushing listeners maybe even to an annoying degree.

Jesus doesn't offer this limit to the idea of neighbor. Instead, he offers a parable that breaks open the definition of a neighbor way beyond the bounds of probably anybody's imagination at that time. To understand the power of this parable, we need a little bit more context.

If you don't know, at this point in history the Samaritans were despised. There was incredible animosity and hatred between Samaritans and Jews. Enemies, they were, in a very real sense. This hatred went back for many years, even centuries. Yet, Jesus chooses to use a Samaritan, the enemy to this group of people, to illustrate the definition of a neighbor.

The Samaritan even lives out in the story what it means to be a good and loving neighbor. While the religious leaders in the gospel story, of course, rush past this dying and beaten man on the road, who's obviously in need of help, it's the Samaritan who stops and cares for him, tending to his wounds, giving him a medicinal mixture of oil and wine, finding him lodging, and even taking care of his medical bills. Okay, think about that.

The generosity that this Samaritan shows is practically unconditional, because he even offers to pay back any of the man's bills, he says, when he returns. At this point in the story, Jesus asks the lawyer, who a neighbor is in that story. The lawyer reluctantly responds, "The one who showed mercy."

Under Jesus' definition then, a neighbor is anyone, including strangers, even our enemies. Imagine how you might react if you saw a stranded car on the road, or an injured person at the park, and then as you look closer, you realize it was a good friend of yours. Well, of course you would stop. But, according to Jesus, that is how we are to react no matter who it is. Friend, stranger, enemy. Anybody in need of mercy. They are our neighbor under Jesus' definition, and we are called to love them as ourselves.

Certainly, at different times and in places in history, Jesus would have told this parable, this story, a little bit differently. Right? He would have used a different cast of characters to illustrate the same point. I think it's helpful to think about what that might be.

If Jesus were telling this story, maybe today, in Israel, maybe he would talk about Palestinians and Jews. Right? But what if Jesus were telling the story here in America? Who would be the cast of characters here? I'm going to leave that to your imagination.

The point is, I think, we can keep filling in the blanks of imagining the good Samaritan, maybe as the person we least expect. The perceived enemy. Or, as the beaten person on the road. Somebody we would be so reticent to stop and help. But how would Jesus tell the story in your life?

Who would be your good Samaritan? Which type of person or group of people, presumably those who are hardest to love, would make an appearance in the good Samaritan in your story? That's what matters here. You see, Jesus is always telling the story of the good Samaritan to us. Jesus has, in a sense, told it to us throughout the centuries in the scriptures, and he continues to challenge us, challenge people with it, over and over and over again. It is a timeless story that always applies.

Though Jesus keeps telling us the story, we as followers, we keep missing it if we're honest, over and over and over again. Furthermore, the good Samaritan story doesn't allow us to be bystanders or mere observers when others get hurt, even if they're not one of us. Jesus reveals in the story that we, the ones called to love our neighbors as ourselves, are the same ones called to stop and tend to the wounds of others and to step in and make a difference. The time to do it is now.

Why aren't more of us speaking up and stepping out to combat violence against others? I am reminded of the poem, written by the Reverend Martin Niemöller in Nazi Germany, you might know it. He wrote this; "First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out because I was not a socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me, and there was no one left to speak for me."

How might you and I be called to speak out for others today? How might we be called to act? What will it look like for us to love our neighbors, in thought, word, and deed and be a good Samaritan? There was a story in the news a few years back about an American student named Shawn Irwin, who had delayed his college graduation for a year in order to work for the coalition for provisional authority in Iraq.

Now one day, while riding in a car, thought to be a green zone in Iraq, he was riding along with an Iraqi driver, a police

officer, and a translator. Their car was ambushed. Shots exploded, Scott was hit, but not fatally. He remembers them being dragged out of the car by the Iraqi translator and placed to the side of the car. Then, the translator began shielding him with his body from further hits, ultimately saving his life.

Indeed, this Iraqi stranger risked his life to save Scott's life. Sadly, the other two men in the car died during that ambush. But Scott was blessed by a true, good Samaritan. While that is an inspiring, and I think should inspire us, it doesn't have to be that extreme for us to live this call out. I once preached about this story at a church in Ohio. A brand-new woman to the church, somebody who had absolutely no church background at all, came to church that Sunday and heard the sermon. Heard the story of the good Samaritan.

That very week, after church, she was on a walk, and encountered a stranger in his driveway as she walked along the neighborhood, who was working on his vehicle. It appeared to her that he might need help. Just the way that he was lying under the car. But she wasn't really sure.

At first, she said to me, that she was going to just pass him by and just mind her own business. "He's probably fine," she thought. But, then that sermon, that story from the gospel flashed back in her mind. She stopped she said. She asked him a simple question, "Sir, do you need help?"

"No," he said, and he thanked her for asking. They began to talk. He was touched by her compassion. Just checking in with him, as a total stranger. She told me that something about that exchange in that moment changed her life. Her whole approach to life was suddenly a bit different. She saw her role in life differently.

What about you? What will it look like for you to live out the call to be a good Samaritan, because Jesus' final words to the lawyer in this gospel passage are also his words for us. He says, "Go, and do likewise." Amen.