

Have Mercy
Luke 10:25–37
Sunday, July 10, 2022

Let us pray: You have already spoken, Lord. May we hear the word that you have spoken, so that we might know you, and in knowing *you*, we might truly know *ourselves* and *each other*, in Christ. Amen.

There is a lot that we can talk about in this story. But the question that struck me as I was reading this text is, “What does it mean to show mercy?” That’s where this story ends up, right? A lawyer asks Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus says, “You’re an expert in the law. What does the *law* say?” The man says, “Love God and love your neighbor. But who is my neighbor?” Jesus tells this story and then asks the man, “Who in this story was a neighbor to the man who was hurt?” The lawyer says, “The one who showed him mercy,” and Jesus says, “Go and do likewise.” Go and show mercy to others. You *could* draw a straight line from the original question of, “What must I do to inherit eternal life,” to, “Show mercy.” So if that is the *point* of Jesus’ story, then *what does it mean to show mercy?*

We could look in the dictionary at a definition of mercy. We find several understandings of mercy there. It is compassion shown to an offender or to one who is subject to one’s power. It is a blessing that is an act of divine favor or compassion. It is compassionate treatment of those in distress. The basic idea across all of those is that someone is in a place of power over someone else – a place where they can determine how it goes with that other person – and instead of *punishing* or even just *ignoring* them, you act from a place of *compassion* and *bless* them. We could talk about what *compassion* means – to *suffer with* someone, to understand their distress and sympathize with them and desire to alleviate their suffering. We could talk about the Greek word for mercy that Luke uses here, *eleos*, kindness or good will toward the afflicted.

All of those tell us what mercy *is*, but I guess the better question is, “What does it *look like* to show mercy?” What does it look like for *us* to show mercy? And *that’s* why Jesus tells this story. Jesus could have just said, “Be merciful,” and that would have answered the question, but it wouldn’t have *shown us* what mercy *looks like*. So how does the Samaritan show mercy? First, he *goes* to the man who is hurt. He doesn’t just pass by like the others did, and he doesn’t just *feel* compassion for him. He *goes* to the man. He *comes near*, like God came near to us in Jesus Christ. This road from Jerusalem down to Jericho was known to have a lot of robbers on it, so it is dangerous. He puts his own safety and wellbeing at risk for the sake of this other person. He doesn’t prioritize *himself*. He *went* to *him*.

He pours oil and wine on his wounds and then bandages them. He tends to the man’s wounds to bring about healing. The Greek word here for *wounds* is the word *traumata*, it’s where we get the word *trauma*. He attends to this man’s trauma. *We all* have trauma in our lives, wounds that we have suffered. What would it look like for us to attend to the trauma of others? Not to ignore it or pass by it or just *feel* bad about it, but to bandage the wounds of others.

“Then he put him on his own animal....” He *carried* the man when he could not make it on his own. What would it look like for us to *carry* one another, to walk with one another when we don’t have the strength to walk alone?

He brought him to an inn. Gave him shelter and sanctuary, a safe place to rest. Jesus says, “Come to me all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” I’ll be your *sanctuary*. What would it look like for us to provide sanctuary for someone who is hurting, a safe place where they can heal?

He gave money to the innkeeper and said, “Take care of him, and when I come back, I’ll repay you whatever more you spend.” He provided for this man’s ongoing needs. This wasn’t just a one-off thing. He made sure that he was provided for. Sometimes mercy *costs us something*. Maybe it’s money. Maybe it’s *time* that we don’t feel like we have. Maybe it costs us something more personal, like ego. What does it look like for us to provide for the needs of others? Not just a one-off thing, but to provide for their ongoing healing.

Over this past week, I’ve been following the story of Aiden McCarthy. Aiden is two years old, and both of his parents were killed in the Highland Park shooting on the fourth of July. At two years old, his entire life has been turned upside down. He has suffered trauma that he is not even fully aware of yet. He will now be raised by his grandparents, and to help them with the unexpected expenses of raising him, there was a GoFundMe page started online so that people could donate money to help. They set a goal of \$500,000; that would get him through college. In the six days since this happened, they have raised over \$3.1 million. *Mercy* from total strangers that can provide for his ongoing healing.

The thing about mercy is that it’s *unexpected*. That is, there is no expectation on this other person’s part that we will do anything to help. It’d be *nice*, but it’s not necessarily *expected*. Mercy is about giving of ourselves to help those who are suffering when we do not *have to*. Mercy is a *choice* that we make to act with compassion and kindness.

But it’s not *just* acting with compassion and kindness toward those we already love and care about, our friends and family. It’s *easy* to show *them* mercy. One of the things Jesus is getting

at here – the *reason* that it’s the good *Samaritan* – is because Christ calls us to show mercy to those we are at odds with.

Samaritans and Jews had a long history. They actually *all* used to be Israelites. They were the same. They all came from the same place and practiced the same religion. They shared a common background, but they came to believe in different things. One of the main differences between Jews and Samaritans arose because the people who lived in Samaria, a city in the northern part of Israel, thought that the proper place to worship God was on Mount Gerazim, where their ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob worshipped, while other Jews said that the temple in Jerusalem was the proper place to worship God. The disagreements and divisions between them grew and grew over the years, to the point that eventually they did not even *associate* with one another. Israelites thought there was nothing *good* about Samaritans, and Samaritans thought there was nothing good about Israelites. They did *not* show one another mercy.

In fact, there’s a story just before this one in Luke’s gospel, where it says that Jesus had “set his face” to go to Jerusalem – because that’s where you go to worship – and he sent messengers ahead of him to make the way ready for him. But when the messengers entered a Samaritan village, it says they did not receive him, “because his face was set toward Jerusalem.” The Samaritans didn’t think that was the proper place to worship God, so they didn’t welcome Jesus. When Jesus’ disciples hear about this, James and John say, “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?!” Let’s *kill* these Samaritans! Not very merciful.

It makes me think about where, in *our* time and *our* lives, we withhold mercy from those we are at odds with. And I think that the place where we have seen this most clearly lately is in the fierce, unforgiving political divide in our country. Conservatives don't think there's anything good about liberals, and liberals don't think there's anything good about conservatives. You may not personally feel that way – and I hope you don't – but it is the dominant narrative in our country today. It has come to a head lately in arguments over gun control and abortion. There are candidates for political office making commercials where they not so subtly talk about *killing* those they disagree with.

And the funny thing is, like Samaritans and Israelites, we come from the same place. We might disagree about the best way to do things, but when it comes down to it, we are all the same. We share a common background; we've just come to believe in different things. Those disagreements and divisions just build and build until we don't even want to *associate* with one another, and we'd rather call down fire from heaven than show mercy.

The past couple of weeks, I've been working on my doctoral thesis. And the central question that I am dealing with is this, "In such a highly polarized society, how can congregations nurture understanding, in order to faithfully and lovingly live life together in the midst of our differences?" Can we *listen* to one another in a way that helps us *understand* one another so that we can have *compassion* for one another? I may disagree with this person, but can I at least understand *why* they believe the way that they do? We don't seem too interested in doing that lately. We don't *listen* to one another; we just *shout past* each other. We don't want to *understand* each other; we just get more and more entrenched in our partisan echo chambers that tell us, "*This* side is right, and *that* side is wrong." That is *not* the way of Jesus Christ.

I think that the church is uniquely positioned to show the world that a different way of being is possible. I think we have a mandate from Christ to do so. To show the world that it is possible for us to live life together and understand one another and maybe not always agree but still *love* one another in the midst of our differences. Because *righteousness* is not about *being right*. It is about *living in right relationship* with God and with your neighbor. And who is my neighbor?

The Hebrew word for *neighbor* that Jesus would have used is the word *rea*. It's made up of two letters, *resh*, which is like our letter *r*, and *ayin*, which doesn't really have an English equivalent (it's kind of a placeholder for vowels). But essentially *r* and *a*. One of the Hebrew words for *enemy* is the word *ar*. Those exact same two letters, *resh* and *ayin*, reversed. It is a reflection of this notion that our *enemies* and our *neighbors* aren't all that different. It's possible to look at an *enemy* and see the makings of a *neighbor*.

It's funny that the question Jesus is originally asked – “Who is my neighbor?” – is not the question that actually gets answered. The lawyer asks, “Who is my neighbor,” Jesus tells this story, and then says, “Which one of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” The lawyer says, “The one who showed him mercy.” And Jesus says, “Go and do likewise.” The lawyer asks, “Who is my neighbor,” and Jesus says, “Go *be* a neighbor.”

It's not about defining the boundaries of who my neighbor is; who's *in* and who's *out*. It's about *being* a neighbor. The question is not, “Who is my neighbor,” but, “Whose neighbor am *I*?” Don't be so concerned about who your neighbor *is* and the *differences* between you that it keeps you from *acting* like a neighbor. Because *mercy* – unexpected kindness and compassion – is a

choice that *you* can make, regardless of this other person. It is in *your hands* to be merciful. It's not, "Who is my neighbor," but, "*Am I* a neighbor?" Do I show mercy? *That's* the question that Jesus is asking here.

This lawyer is an expert in Jewish law, and he wants to *codify* what it means to be a neighbor. He wants a legalistic definition. He wants to *legislate* it. But we can't legislate mercy. That seems to be what a lot of people (on *all* sides) want to do now – *legislate* righteousness, *legislate* mercy. A lot of Christians seem to have placed their ultimate hope in laws and the political process, in the kingdom of man. Because making laws to enforce seems easier than being a neighbor. But it doesn't work. We can't *legislate* mercy, we have to *live* it. Like Henri Nouwen says, "We can't love *issues*, but we can love *people*, and the love of people reveals to us the way to deal with issues."

As the church of Jesus Christ, we are not called to change the world through legislation. Either way – more conservative or more liberal – we are not called to change the world through legislation. We are called to *be* the world as *already* changed by Jesus Christ. To show the world that a different way of living, a different way of ordering life and society is possible, and in fact *it is here*. That God wants something more for us than we are currently allowing ourselves (and each other) to have. We are called to *be* neighbors to all those in need. And we are *all* in need. We are called, by Christ, not to *punish* one another or just *ignore* one another, but to show mercy, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.