

HOW FAR SHOULD LOVE REACH?

Sermon preached by The Rev. Sarah Segal McCaslin

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Scripture: Luke 10:25-37

A man is robbed, beaten, stripped of his clothing and left for dead in a ditch alongside a dangerous highway... And so begins one of the most beloved stories in our Christian tradition. The story of the Good Samaritan is the quintessential Bible story; one of the first we share with our children; one of the few that we remember in reasonably good detail; one with a clarity of message that is a refreshing change from the more obscure parts of the Bible. There is plot; there are characters; there is movement and action and resolution. There is a hero, and there is a moral. And yet, the story is also violent and unsettling, and if we read it not as allegory, but as an example of the radical hospitality that Jesus commands of us, it is a disturbing illustration of the demands of a faithful life.

The story is set within a dialogue between Jesus and a religious scholar who are sparring over the requirements for inheriting eternal life, specifically the Levitical law of the Torah that commands, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' The lawyer challenges Jesus to interpret the law. Specifically, 'Who is a neighbor?' Or, in other words, How far should love reach? What are the boundaries that define those to whom the faithful are obliged to grant such love and those from whom the faithful are obliged to receive such love? And Jesus, in typical Jesus fashion, answers the lawyer's question with a story that flips around and turns inside out our well-worn patterns for organizing our world, and, in the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, shows the "unending worth of the apparently worthless and the unending worthlessness of what is apparently so valuable."¹

A man is robbed, beaten, stripped of his clothing and left for dead in a ditch alongside a dangerous highway between Jerusalem and Jericho. A priest and a Levite, upstanding and well-respected religious leaders, take one glance at the victim and cross over to the other side, averting their gaze and picking up the pace, moving past the discomfiting scene as quickly as possible. We don't know their motives or rationalizations for passing by, only that they seem to have failed to meet even the lowest expectations for human kindness as holy and righteous men. A Samaritan man responds with radical compassion, kneeling in the blood-soaked dirt to apply vinegar and oil to cleanse the man's wounds. We can't peer inside the mind of the Samaritan to decipher his reasons for stopping; we only know that the Samaritans shared with Israel a long and bitter history of racial and religious hatred, and he would have seemed the least likely of heroes to the original hearers of this story. Abandoning his itinerary, the Samaritan takes the victim upon his own animal and carries him to an inn. He stays with him overnight, tending to his wounds and giving him food and water to sate his hunger and slake his thirst. The next morning, the Samaritan gives money to the innkeeper, promising more, if he will continue to care for the wounded man in his absence.

"Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" Jesus asks the lawyer. And the lawyer answers, and we can only imagine that his voice

cracked and wavered with surprise and humility at the reversal of it all, “The one who showed him mercy.”

The unsettling truth of this beloved story, and a truth that we rarely speak of, is that we seem to be set up for failure. If the moral of the story is that we should be like the Samaritan, then Jesus is instructing us to become the one who aides those who suffer, extending neighborliness that asks no reward. Jesus charges us to be altruistic, to be good without an agenda, to do the right thing without thought to acknowledgement, thanks, or compensation. Jesus wants us to get in that ditch, haul the muddy and bloodied victim into our cars, dirtying our upholstery, making us late to our next appointments, and to do so without question, without consideration to our own safety or well-being. Like the “subway hero,” Wesley Autrey, who in 2007 jumped in front of a speeding subway train to save a stranger who had fallen off the platform’s edge, Jesus wants us to engage in acts of radical concern for others that may be life-endangering. To fulfill the law and inherit eternal life, there can be no limit to the reach of love, no limit to how far we will go to save another, no matter whom the other is, or who we are to the other, even to the point of jeopardizing our own safety, or the safety of our families. To the question, How far should love reach? Jesus seems to respond, ‘Beyond the limits of your own horizon.’

As much as we would like to be the Samaritan, and claim that story as our motto for personal fidelity, there is a limit to what we will do for the sake of others. Isn’t there? Would you jeopardize your own safety, or the safety of your family, for the love of neighbor? Would you risk your career, or your comfort, or the hope of a better future, for the love of neighbor? Would you miss a dinner date, or give away your new coat, or empty your checking account, for the love of neighbor? How far should love reach?

Perhaps in a moment of adrenaline, the subway superman Autrey jumped into heroism, but don’t you wonder if he would have chosen differently, if he’d had just a moment more to think about the risks and gaze upon the terrified faces of his young daughters? Isn’t it possible that the Levite and the priests were good guys, too, but felt weighed down by other responsibilities or circumstances that we can’t know about? If the moral of the story of the Good Samaritan is that we must all be the Good Samaritan, how can we do anything BUT fail?

Well, the climax of the narrative does not come at the end with the lawyer’s answer to Jesus’ final question, but occurs in the middle of the story, at the very instance when the Samaritan sees the wounded man by the side of the road and is ‘moved with pity.’ The Greek word translated as ‘moved with pity,’ can also be rendered ‘compassion,’ or, even more literally, ‘from the viscera.’ To experience compassion, to be moved with pity, is to experience a gut-wrenching emotional tidal wave for another being. Compassion moved the Samaritan to action, not religious duty or moral obligation. This is the root of Jesus’ final counsel to the lawyer, “Go and do likewise.” Who we are or where we rank on the social totem pole is no predictor, or maybe an indirect predictor, of our potential for being moved with pity for the sake of another. The unending worth of compassion subverts the unending worthlessness of the fervor of faith, or attention to the details of law and doctrine, when we are in the presence of another’s suffering.

Our identity as Christians is no guarantee that we will respond with compassion to those who suffer. We cannot wear our faith upon us like a bullet-proof vest or a fire-proof blanket or a superhero's cape. With our church membership card we gain neither protection from the danger of the world nor superpowers to confront it. Only our experience of compassion and mercy can link us to the love that Christ showed, and only these experiences will catalyze action. Just as the climax of the story is the moment of compassion, not the actions that followed, the beating heart of the story is about our need to experience that gut-wrenching tidal wave of compassion, born out of our love for God and neighbor, and not about what happens next.

There is another Greek term, *metanoia*, which translates as 'change of heart,' and oftentimes 'repentance.' Though the word does not appear in this account, it has an overarching presence in Jesus' storytelling. When Jesus eats and drinks with tax collectors at a banquet, and the Pharisees complain, 'Why do you eat and drink with sinners?' Jesus responds, "I have come to call not the righteous, but sinners, to [a change of heart]." It is what Jesus expects from the lawyer- a change of heart, a turning toward God's love and away from the legalism of the Torah. It is what got Jesus into trouble, because it entails an outspoken preference for the least among us, and the upending of familiar structures that place some in positions of privilege and power.

The twentieth-century theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, describes this expectation in his book, *Life Together*, "When God was merciful to us, we learned to be merciful with [others.] When we received forgiveness instead of judgment, we, too, were made ready to forgive [others.] The more we received, the more we were able to give; and the more meager our [love of others,] the less were we living by God's mercy and love. Thus God taught us to meet one another as God has met us in Christ."²

Bonhoeffer lived and died according to Gospel stories like the Good Samaritan. And Bonhoeffer set an example which would be impossible to follow. Refusing to participate in the "German-Christian" compromise with the Nazi government, Bonhoeffer was vocal in his critique of the idolatry of Hitler and collaborated in a plot on the leader's life, having concluded in the depths of his soul that to withdraw from those in the political and military resistance would be irresponsible cowardice. He did not believe that everybody should act as he did, but from where he stood, he saw no possibility of retreat into any sinless, righteous, pious refuge. On April 5, 1943, Bonhoeffer was arrested and incarcerated in Tegel, a military prison. Two years later, on Sunday, April 8, 1945, he conducted a little service of worship for the prisoners, and the following day, he was hanged.

Remarkable in Bonhoeffer's writings is his lack of pretension- he never wrote about a Christian calling to heroism or superhuman acts of courage and compassion. Bonhoeffer was obsessed with, and spent his life articulating and living out, the simplicity of faith as he saw it. "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love your neighbor in the tiny, daily acts of kindness that life requires; love your neighbor according to the standard that God has set.

We've imagined ourselves as the Good Samaritan and seen how most of us are certain to fall short. We've put ourselves in the shoes of the priest and Levite and experienced what it's like not to live up to other's, and God's, expectations. But have we ever imagined ourselves as the victim? Robbed, beaten, stripped of our clothing and left for dead in a ditch alongside a

dangerous highway... when a man approaches- an outcast and radical outsider, rejected by others. And he reaches out for us anyway, pulls us from the ditch, offers tender, loving care to our wounded bodies, nurses us back to health, never leaving our side. Perhaps the good news of this story is that Jesus is the Good Samaritan. Jesus paid no mind to the laws of purity, paid no mind to the dirt and the blood and danger. Jesus is our living illustration of compassion, the plumb line against which we judge ourselves. Yet that judgment is full of mercy and grace, born of love and desire for our fullness. In experiencing God's love, we achieve the possibility of showing God's love in our compassion for others- a gut-wrenching emotional tidal wave that mimics God's love for us.

The Christian life, according to Bonhoeffer, can never be merely intellectual theory, or doctrine divorced from life, or mystical emotion, but always must be responsible, obedient action, the discipleship of Christ in every situation, personal and public.³ The Christian life is concrete, specific, mundane, intimate, unavoidable, and risky. The Christian life is like a man, wounded and bleeding by the side of the road, and we, travelers and passers-by, stop to help, to bandage the wounds, to usher him to safety, to watch by his bedside, until he has the strength to move on, dissolving in the distance, beyond our horizon.

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Faith in Community* (Harper & Row Publishers, Inc.: New York, 1954).

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*