

Back your Compassion with Action
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Series: Kingdom Come: The Parables of Jesus
Luke 10:25-37

The corona virus has changed so much about our world in the last few months. Some businesses have suffered financially while others have not only survived, they thrived. The Recreational Vehicle market and camping certainly has. The RV market has seen record sales in the time of coronavirus.

My family used to camp. A lot. We actually took a trip many summers ago and camped our way through Maine, Canada the Adirondacks and finally home. Three weeks with three kids and one *little* pop-up camper. You noticed I said USED to camp.

Campgrounds themselves are interesting places – full of a diverse group of individuals seeking the great outdoors. People from different cultures with different backgrounds, various levels of education, different races and religions. And campgrounds are not very private. Sites within the campgrounds are not spread far out geographically. Most sites are not much farther away from each other than the other side of the road. Still, I mostly have good memories of camping. But there is one particular camping trip that brings up a not so fond memory as the campers at the neighboring site began arguing which quickly escalated and got very ugly. I retreated to the darkness of my camper and watched and listened as the woman there was berated and belittled by an abusive partner, I assumed but don't know for sure was her husband. I knew she was in trouble and needed help but I was afraid. And she was just sitting there taking it from him. Who am I to interfere? I didn't want my husband interfering either. Too dangerous, too messy, too risky. I chose not to get involved.

This is the kind of scenario Jesus illustrates in his parable of the Good Samaritan. This passage finds Jesus being challenged by a legal expert or lawyer. Jesus has been stirring up authorities by upending the establishment by reinterpreting the law: you can heal on the Sabbath?! Eat with tax collectors and sinners?! Welcome back a wayward son!?

First century lawyers were also known as scribes or doctors of the law. Their job was to interpret and try to make sense of the laws and were known for debating issues and wrestling with what was "truth." True to form this lawyer is up for a debate – so he confronts Jesus with a frequently discussed question: "Rabbi, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" As good teachers do Jesus turns the conversation around and answers the lawyer's question with a question: "You are a legal expert," He replied, "What is written in the law?"

The lawyer recites the formula he has heard Jesus teach before, a simple summary that other rabbis accepted. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind," he quoted, "and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

"You are correct," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live." Luke 10:25-28

Now, the loving God part is all well and good, I imagine the lawyer is thinking. But who is this "neighbor" you claim I am supposed to love? He wants clarification, specifics. Scripture tells us

he wants to justify himself and he probably hopes Jesus will answer: “Your relatives, your friends, fellow Jews.” The people you know. People you’re comfortable with. Your inner circle.

Instead Jesus does what we know him so well for: he tells a story designed to shock and awe. The parable of the Good Samaritan is one of the most well-known parables in the Bible. It’s the basis of statutes called Good Samaritan laws to protect bystanders from helping without worrying about legal repercussions. Today the word Samaritan conjures up positive images. To be a Samaritan to someone else is a good thing. Not in Jesus’ day. The People of Samaria, were hated by Jews because they intermarried with non-Jews and did not strictly observe Mosaic Law.

Jesus sets the scene for the lawyer: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead.” Luke 10:30-31

This road is indeed a dangerous, well known for being infested with robbers and thieves and a lone traveler would have been an easy target. Jesus does not suggest the man as being any other race so his listeners would assume the traveler to be Jewish. The man was stripped of clothes, a primary way of identifying people. And because he’s described as “half-dead” he’s most likely unresponsive and he cannot verbally identify himself. Jesus continues:

“A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.” Luke 10:31-32

The first to arrive is a priest who’s most likely on a donkey and immediately steers his mount across the road to pass on the other side. Doesn’t even get within six feet of him because if he did, he would become “unclean” and subjected to a humiliating purification ritual as well as a loss of income for a period of time – an unclean priest can’t perform and therefore be paid for priestly duties. And what if the robbers are still lurking about? He uses these reasons to justify ignoring this man and continues on his way.

The second to arrive is the Levite. Levites also were religious leaders who served at the temple but were lower in stature and wealth. He too would be made unclean if he touched the body but his purification was less rigorous. Still, it would be an annoyance. It could also put him at risk. It is far easier and safer for the Levite to put his head down, continue on his journey and let the man be. Now comes the shocking twist:

“But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him.” Luke 10:33

What?! It is shocking that a man the lawyer considered to be a dirty, half-breed, temple-defiler is the one Jesus uses as the hero! Jesus tells us the Samaritan took pity on the injured man – pity being defined as a feeling of sorrow and compassion caused by witnessing the suffering and misfortunes of others. The word compassion has at its roots the word “innards” or what we more commonly refer to as “guts” ...the Samaritan had a deep, gut-level reaction to the injured man...even though the injured man could very well hate the Samaritan’s guts.

So, in spite of many justifiable reasons not to:

“He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii^[c] and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’” Luke 10:34-35

He not only stops, he goes out of his way, above and beyond, risking his life really, to do what the Priest and the Levite would not. He provides first-aid, transports him to the inn, pays for the injured man to stay there and recover and promises to return and pay any debt he incurs as he recovers.

The story is so insulting when Jesus asks the lawyer: “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man”, he cannot bear to even say the word “Samaritan” instead: “The one who had mercy on him.” Jesus told him, ‘Go and do likewise.’” Luke 10:36-37

On the face of it, what the Samaritan did for that injured Jewish man didn’t really make sense: why would he show compassion to someone who hated him, risk his own life, and spend his own money for no acknowledgement or reward. Why? He chose to back his compassion with action. Action that was unselfish, risky, but action that reflected God’s love for him onto someone else.

The Priest and the Levite chose to look away. They both chose not to get involved – too busy, too messy, too risky.

She was mostly non responsive, had her clothing taken from her and was lying in a dirty cell in obvious distress. My daughter Kim was arrested on April 14 and though the behavior at the time of the arrest, while wrong, was a result of a mental health crisis, instead of hospitalization she was taken to jail. Unbeknownst to my family, while incarcerated her mental and physical state began to deteriorate. She was without a mattress at times and had no books or possessions. She hadn’t showered in weeks and was slipping into catatonia. Three of her fellow inmates became increasingly concerned. But because the woman they knew only as “Kimberly” rarely spoke, it took them close to two months to figure out her last name.

Once they did, these 3 women started calling: Their parents. Their friends. Anyone who would listen. Why? They didn’t know her. They had legitimate reasons to look away, put their heads down and serve their time so they could be released and be on their way.

Jails are punitive places, speaking out could have landed them in solitary confinement or cost them commissary privileges. And sadly, the way my daughter was being treated was considered within the legal guidelines of prison protocol. The corrections officers were following the law. The Priest and the Levite were following the law. The law can be a thinly veiled excuse to hide behind. You can interpret the law however you want....but it should not be used to justify bad behavior. That’s not right.

Though it was a risk to speak out, these women backed their compassion with action. And they offered comfort when and how they could. One told me she read to Kim. One asked for permission to enter Kim’s cell to clean what the Correction Officers wouldn’t and Kim couldn’t. One bought things at the commissary for Kim on her own account because Kim was not allowed

out of her cell. What these three Good Samaritan women did profoundly touched and I believe helped save my daughter's life.

Once we were made aware of the situation, we fought to get Kim moved to a place where her physical and mental health could and continues to be addressed and I am happy and grateful to report she continues to improve.

When I found out how Kim was mistreated in jail I had a profound and visceral gut reaction causing me to look at the laws regarding treatment of those experiencing a mental health crisis not just in Bucks County but in Pennsylvania. Because of the nature of mental illness, involuntary treatment and hospitalization is necessary in certain circumstances as it was for Kim. But the criteria for getting help for someone who doesn't want it requires crisis: a clear and present danger and threat of serious bodily harm to oneself or someone else is imminent. That's too late. And when the police are called to the scene the individual in crisis is often taken to jail. Translation: In 44 states, a jail holds more mentally ill individuals than the largest remaining state psychiatric hospitals.

I have lobbied for mental health court in Bucks County which diverts offenders with severe mental illness into a judicially supervised treatment and I believe it will happen. It was recently announced a mental health facility will be constructed near the prison to help 4-6 of the sickest inmates. And I am advocating to fund an Assisted Outpatient Treatment which provides more community services with a lesser standard than imminent crisis to get someone the help they need. If you'd like to learn more or partner with me there is information about ways to do that on our website.

The parable of the Good Samaritan affirms the reality of our duty to love and help others with compassion and action. Not when it's convenient or easy or safe. Not just people who look like you or think like you. Jesus message is that God's kingdom is not only for the Jews or the Priests or the righteous or the pious. His kingdom is for the Samaritans, the sinners, those struggling with physical and mental illness. For the abused and yes even for the abusers. To truly understand what it means to love your neighbor as yourself we look to Jesus, who traveled the very same road from Jericho to Jerusalem to his cross where he gave us the perfect example of what it means to back compassion with action. Let's go and do likewise.