

“Who is in Need of Mercy?”

Luke 10:25-37

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We are familiar with this story, even familiar with the two shocking elements in it. The first shock is that the very people one would most expect to help the injured man, a priest and the Levite, walk on by. They have their reasons, namely that they would become unclean if they touched his bloody body and they have people to see, places to be. We should not judge them too harshly because they are not that different from us.

Some years ago a famous experiment was conducted with seminary students. Researchers gathered a group of ministry students in a classroom and told them they each needed to record a talk about the Parable of the Good Samaritan. The recordings, however, were going to be done in a building on the other side of the campus and because of a tight schedule they needed to hurry to that building. Unbeknownst to the students, researchers had planted an actor to play the part of a man in distress on the way to that other building. He was slumped in an alley, coughing and suffering. Researchers wondered what would happen if the students actually encountered someone in need on their way to give a talk about the Good Samaritan. Would they be Good Samaritans? Well, no, as a matter of fact, they were not. Almost all of them rushed past the hurting man. One student even stepped over the man's body as he hurried to teach about the Parable of the Good Samaritan! The seminary students were not bad people, simply human. Like the priest and the Levite, they had other priorities that kept them from acting with compassion. Knowing the right thing to do and actually doing the right thing are two completely different things. We value compassion yet we also know how difficult it is to act compassionately to those in need when given the chance.

That is what sets the Good Samaritan apart. He had plenty of reasons to pass by the injured man as the priest and Levite did. Yet he stopped and helped, risking his own safety, his own life to help a human being in need. That he stopped was surprising enough but the biggest shock was that he was a Samaritan, a sworn enemy of the Jews. It would be similar to a member of Al Qaeda helping an injured American. Not at all what we would expect.

That Good Samaritan reminds me of a modern day Good Samaritan that surfaced in New York City a few years ago. A construction worker named Wesley Autrey was standing on a subway platform with his two young daughters, ages four and six, waiting on a train. Suddenly another man on the platform, suffering from a seizure, fell off the platform down onto the subway tracks. In the next moment, headlights of a rapidly approaching train appeared in the subway tunnel. Wesley Autrey jumped down onto the tracks to drag the man out of the train's way. He immediately realized the train was coming too fast and there wasn't time to pull the man off the tracks. So Wesley pressed the man into the hollowed-out space between the rails and spread his own body over him to protect him as the train passed over the two of them. The train cleared Wesley by mere inches, coming close enough to leave grease marks on his knit cap. When the train came to a halt, Wesley called up to the frightened onlookers on the platform. "There are two little girls up there. Let them know their Daddy is OK."

Wesley Autrey immediately became a national hero. People were astonished he risked his life for a complete stranger! The press dubbed him "The Subway Superman" and the "Harlem Hero." One headline described Wesley Autrey in biblical terms. It read, "Good Samaritan Saves Man on Subway Tracks."

The actions of Good Samaritans are remarkable because they are so far beyond what most of us would do. Like the priest and the Levite and the seminary students, each of us would probably find ourselves passing by on the other side of the road, or staring down in horror at the man who fell on the tracks. Just because we know what is the right thing to do does not mean we can do it. It is simply not in our nature to forget ourselves and risk everything for a stranger. We cannot simply will ourselves to have compassion. If we are going to be Good Samaritans it will mean more than a change of mind. It will take a change of heart. And that is what Jesus' parable is about: a change of heart.

Robert Wuthnow, a professor at Princeton University, conducted research about why some people are generous and compassionate while others are not. He discovered many people were compassionate because of an event in their own life in which a person had responded with compassion. That event transformed their lives. Wuthnow tells the story of Jack Casey, a rescue squad worker, who had little reason to be a Good Samaritan. Casey was

raised in a tough home, the child of an alcoholic father. He once said, "All my father ever taught me is that I didn't want to grow up to be like him."

But something happened to Jack when he was a child that changed his life, changed his heart. He was having surgery one day and he was scared. The surgical nurse standing near reassured him. "Don't worry," she said to Jack. "I'll be right here beside you no matter what happens." And when Jack woke up, she was--true to her word--right there.

Years later, Jack Casey, now a paramedic, was sent to the scene of a highway accident. A man was pinned upside down in his pickup truck, and as Jack tried to get him out of the wreckage, gasoline dripped down on both of them. The rescuers were using power tools to cut the metal, so one spark could have caused everything to go up in flames. The driver was frightened, crying out how scared he was of dying. Jack said to the man, "I'm right here with you, I'm not going anywhere." Jack recalled later that when he said that to the man, he remembered how that nurse had said the same thing to him when he was scared and that she never left him. Days later, the rescued truck driver said to Jack, "You know, you were an idiot, the thing could have exploded and we both would have burned up!" "I just could not leave you," Jack replied.

Something had happened to Jack Casey that transformed him, made him into a Good Samaritan. Has anything like that ever happened to you? Yes it has. That is the point of Jesus' Parable of the Good Samaritan.

What the lawyer realized in his conversation with Jesus and what we also realize is that we do not have the strength to always do what is right. Even knowing what is the right thing to do does not give us the strength to do it. We do not have the power to be truly righteous. We are helpless to be Good Samaritans on our own strength. We are helpless to do so because we are the person in the ditch. We are the one who lies helpless and wounded by the road, the one who needs to be rescued. And along comes a Good Samaritan, a Good Samaritan named Jesus -despised and rejected- who comes to save us, who tenderly lifts us into his arms and takes us to the place of healing. As the Apostle Paul said, while we were still God's enemies, God saw us in the ditch and had compassion, and in came Jesus to save us.

So the question we take away from today's parable is not the lawyer's, "What is the definition of 'neighbor'?" The question is **who has been neighbor to you?** Jesus Christ has been neighbor to you. The crucified one has been neighbor to you. Have you felt his mercy make your own heart merciful? Then in your heart you will know what this means: Go and do likewise. Amen.