

ARE YOU SURE?

July 14, 2019
Pentecost 5
[Luke 10:25-37](#)

(prayer)

The gospel of Luke preserved for us what has become (perhaps) the most well-known of Jesus' teaching moments.

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Luke includes the iconic "*parable of the good samaritan*" as a follow up to a teaching that the Mark and Matthew gospels also saw as **so central** to Jesus' message that they included it as well. The pre-parable teaching starts with a question:

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Which commandment is the most important of all?

The most important commandment is

'Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.'

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The second is this:

'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'

There is no other commandment greater than these.

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John's gospel doesn't record this exact teaching, but does quote Jesus as saying something similar to his disciples on the night of his arrest:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

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"Living out an honest compassion for God and for others" is basically a summary of everything that Jesus taught.

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In the conversation about great commandments, all three synoptic gospels say that Jesus is having a conversation with an expert in the Torah (described as a scribe or a lawyer). They indicate that it was more of a *contentious debate* rather than *mutual discourse*.

Regardless, referring to Deuteronomy 6 and Leviticus 19 are seen as *right answers*.

As I said, Luke shares this greatest commandment teaching in a unique context compared to the other gospels.

Luke's lawyer is the one who proposes Deuteronomy and Leviticus as the central commandments; Mark and Matthew have Jesus answering the question. In Luke, this lawyer agrees that living out these laws is a path to eternal life -- another way of saying that one has won the favour of God.

When asked the question: *what must I do to inherit eternal life?* Jesus answers with *love the Lord, your God and love your neighbour as yourself and you will live.*

It is the lawyer's attempt to understand the edges of the Torah that leads to the familiar parable. Yes, *love my neighbour... but, who is my neighbour?*

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You heard the story... about a violent robbery victim who is ignored by people assumed to have

gained the favour of God, but is shown practical compassion by someone assumed to be outside of God's favour.

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A quick history on the divide between Samaria and Judea:

When the Hebrew people evolved from being twelve distinct tribes governed simply by a shared law and became one nation ruled by a king (~1100BCE), Israel's first king, Saul, came from the tribe of Benjamin. After a less than stellar reign, Saul's eventually anointed successor, David, came from the tribe of Judah.

A tradition quickly took hold that, because of Saul and his family's wickedness, (that) Judah would provide all future kings. The Hebrew nation remained united for one more generation after David as Solomon succeeded his father.

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David had built a new capital city on the outskirts of his hometown of Bethlehem. David set up the nomadic tent tabernacle (dating back to the time of Moses containing the [Ark of the Covenant](#)) on the highest hill in Jerusalem with the intention that it would not be moved around anymore.

Solomon would permanently solidify Jerusalem as the centre of political and religious influence with the construction of a stone temple to replace the tabernacle.

This upset the northern tribes who viewed this as a rejection of the traditions dating back to the time of Jacob: whose family had lived near what became the city of Shechem. To the northerners, the veneration of Mount Zion and Jerusalem was an artificial vanity project of a king from Judah. Before David, one of the holiest mountains in the was Gerizim: a mountain of blessing from the earliest years of the Hebrew people in Canaan after the time of Moses.

And so, the tribes were split on who should be the next king after Solomon. Rehoboam (Solomon's son) attempted to retain the kingship of Israel.

However, when Jeroboam, who was not of the Davidic line, proclaimed king over all Israel, only the tribes of Judah and Benjamin remained loyal to the house of David under Rehoboam.

An era of a divided monarchy began. The northern kingdom continued to be called the Kingdom of Israel (with Samaria and Shechem as central cities), while the southern kingdom was called the Kingdom of Judah (with Jerusalem as its capital).

This was the political and religious reality that dominated Hebrew history for a few more centuries until Israel was overrun by the Assyrian Empire in the late 700s.

Judah was occupied by the Babylonian Empire in the mid 600s.

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Although Judah managed to survive the battle of empires, the ten northern tribes were lost to history as an identified region or people.

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Even so, in the centuries that followed, the people who continued to live in the northern regions (some with Hebrew roots and some not) - especially in the areas around Samaria, Shechem and Gerizim - carried on the tradition of suspicion and antagonism toward Jerusalem and Judah.

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As the author of Luke implies in today's reading, Samaritans did not associate with Jews. There are several references to Samaritans within the new testament and always in a negative way from a Jewish perspective.

There is a story told in the gospel of John where a thirsty Jesus asks a local woman of Shechem to help him draw water from Jacob's Well; the text tells the readers that this was a breach of custom and practice as *Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans*.

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When Jesus asked the teacher of the law: *which of these three people, do you think, was a neighbour to the one who fell into the hands of the robbers?*, the lawyer could not ignore that the obvious hero of Jesus' parable is not the godly temple priest or the devoted levite, but the detested foreigner.

Go and do likewise! is Jesus' final word on the subject.

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To sum up the conversation between Jesus and the Torah expert:

What must I do to inherit eternal life?

What does the Torah say?

Love God with my whole being and love my neighbour as myself.

I agree. Do that.

But, who is my neighbour?

...

Be as neighbourly as the Samaritan in the story.

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Notice how Jesus never really answers the original question.

Who is my neighbour? Be a neighbour.

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It is as if Jesus is emphasizing the verb in sentence that ends Leviticus 19:18 rather than the object of the sentence. The command to *love your neighbour as yourself* is to focus on love not neighbour.

The question Jesus answered was not *who is my neighbour?* but *what does loving my neighbour look like?*

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Last Sunday, if you were in church, you might remember that we heard part of a mid-first century letter to a group of Christians in Galatia that instructed the believers to *work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith*. The apostle Paul knew that it should be easier to be supportive of those who we regularly associate with, those with whom we hold things in common, those with whom share beliefs. But, Paul was clear that this was not to be the limits of their good work: that the circle was to be wider than the "in group".

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I find it interesting that, in today's parable, the national identity of the mugging victim is never mentioned.

If the victim was not Jewish, would the priest and the levite have been somewhat justified in their lack of action?

If the victim was Jewish, would it further emphasize the beyond expectations goodness of the Samaritan's behaviour?

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The clear intent of the lawyer's question was to find out when is it okay to *not* behave in a loving manner. He asked: Can I limit the definition of neighbour?

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We all know that not every one is easy to love.

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I think that we all need to admit that - like the Torah expert in this Luke reading - we have trouble with the practical implications of the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

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Can we, like the Torah lawyer, limit the definition of neighbour?

And if neighbour is off the table: can we qualify what love means?

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Each of us, makes judgments about the future based on what we have come to believe because of past learnings and experiences.

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Now, the hard edge of this reality can lead to deeply embedded hateful attitudes. Some people have allowed themselves to be taught that everyone of an identifiable group is unworthy of compassion - that it is okay to exclude, revile and even kill "the other". Over the millennia and even today, some people even use their religion to justify a holy killing of non-believers or unrepentant sinners.

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I'm not going to waste time in this sermon proclaiming that hate crimes are inconsistent with the teachings of Jesus -- that is a "duh" moment.

But... you don't have to be a Nazi to find Luke chapter 10 challenging.

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We **all** pre-judge how we react when (what seems like) a similar situation appears to be repeating itself. We may not call it *prejudice*, preferring to see ourselves as *cautious*.

Sometimes, we have been burned and aren't so willing to be burned easily again.

Fair enough.

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At an intellectual level, we might be able to bring ourselves to accept that a "generic someone" (regardless of their character or actions) is worthy of love.

But that can be tested when that *someone* has a face (familiar or stranger) and they have attitudes or actions that we find utterly unacceptable or even detestable.

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It is certainly hard enough when it affects us directly, but we can even find ourselves reacting to an event on the news.

You may have heard about the [NBC story](#) that broke last Tuesday about a serious incident report from a fifteen year old girl who had been held in a migrant detention centre in Yuma, Arizona.

She claimed that a large, bearded, border patrol officer put his hands inside her bra, pulled down her underwear and groped her as part of what was meant to be a routine pat-down and that this happened in front of other immigrants and officers. All the while, she said that he spoke English to other officers and was laughing during the entire process.

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What do you think about Jeffrey Epstein after his [arrest](#) in New York on human trafficking charges? Or the Florida prosecutors who agreed to a grant him generous plea deal in 2008, giving him a fresh decade to perhaps continue this alleged behaviour?

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And closer to home, what about the (still at large) murder(s) of [Kevin Sim](#)?

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How easy is it to see someone who would do *these kind of things* as a "neighbour to be loved"?

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or the war criminal,
or the terrorist,
or the greedy, heartless business person,
or the corrupt politician,
or the slum landlord,
or the abuser,
or the car thief,
or the home invader,
or the bully who puts you down and makes you feel less than whole?

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The implications of the Parable of the Good Samaritan are not so easy if we are to love *these* neighbours.

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Why would loving our least neighbourly neighbours be a good thing?

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Can it be that we believe that the more that compassion inhabits this world, the better all people's lives will be?

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I am prepared to consider that when we show compassion to an other, we are proclaiming a basic holy worth that exists within everyone that cannot be destroyed by the worst within us or them.

We want to believe that God has this capacity towards us.

And we are invited to be holy hands and feet in the world -- sharing glimpses of the loving capacity of God in how we think and act.

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The call to love one's neighbour is not a condoning of destructive, dehumanizing attitudes and actions, it is in spite of them.

To love the unlovable is to believe that the spark of the divine (deep within each person) can not be quenched.

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The Apostle Paul expressed a deep confidence (to the Roman Christians) that *neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Within these words is the deeper message that... even our worst actions and attitudes do not immune us from God's compassion.

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And so, in the spirit of the parable of the good Samaritan, I wonder if we can work on separating the **person** from the **action** and allow ourselves a compassion for them without accepting how they behave.

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In some cases, at any given place and time, the best we might be able to do is to hold this in a quiet corner of our heart and mind. We may not be able to express this stubborn love in any tangible way.

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We do this all the time within very close relationships; walking the line between loving the person,

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without having to like who they are.

The more important a relationship has been to us, the further we might be willing to stretch that line. Even then, few of us do *not* have a breaking point where embracing anymore care or compassion is too painful.

And that breaking point can come a lot sooner when the 'neighbour' has not been emotionally bound to us in the past.

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And yet, not allowing the light of love to completely go out is to keep hope in God alive.

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Hope in the promise of repentance and reclamation is a very healthy thing to allow to take root in our hearts. It can feed our better spirits, even if we allow it to fade into our subconscious now and then.

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I see the Good Samaritan inviting us to consider the deep potential and power of compassion.

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Luke is the gospel that also records Jesus as saying: *If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? If you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? But love your enemies, do good to them.* (Luke 6:32-35)

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In my angriest, most vengeful moment, I try *hard* to believe that behind every detestable person is a broken spirit, a near-defeated psyche -- a flawed human being... *and* one who (in spite of the worst of their actions and attitudes) has not been able to lose God's love for them and (therefore) is one whom I can still call "neighbour".

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I will seek faith enough to love all of my neighbours, even (especially) when I don't like them.

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I have been (and continue to be) grateful when others hold out this hope for me.

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I seek the grace to do the same...
to go and do likewise

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Let us pray:

God of Justice and Mercy, fill our hearts with a love for neighbours and minds that believe in restoration. Amen.

#489VU "Friends Let Us Love Each Other"

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