

NORTHWOOD UNITED CHURCH

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Scripture: Luke 10:25-37

Who Is My Neighbour?

Jesus was a radical. He challenged the principalities and the powers of his day. He healed on the Sabbath. He defended his disciples when they picked grain and ate it on the Sabbath. He spent time with children. He welcomed the outcasts. He spoke with women in public. He challenged the Scribes and Pharisees. He over-turned the tables in the Temple. He taught a radical message of love and compassion in a world of violence.

Likewise, Jesus followers were radical. When Paul and Silas entered Thessalonica, the residents of the city said, "These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here." They brought a radical message that conflicted with the way people were living their lives. That message was turning the world of the Thessalonians upside down.

How long has it been since we, the disciples of Jesus today, have been described as those who have turned the world upside down? The last time I remember was in 1987 when the church made a decision to ordain gays and lesbian people! That was 29 years ago. Not a very good record.

Why is this, you might ask? Why aren't we willing to go to bat for the homeless and the outcast? Why aren't we talking about and challenging the government on their stance about the Israel/Palestine issue? Why aren't we crying out for the women who have "disappeared" – most of who are aboriginal? Why didn't we all join the "Occupy" movement as part of the 99%? Why haven't we worked harder, made more sacrifices for Syrian Refugees? Why haven't we been more supportive of our Muslim sisters and brothers? Why haven't we been more supportive of our aboriginal people? Why?

Well I think it is because we are afraid of being radical. We are afraid of losing people. We are afraid of losing donors. We are afraid of looking bad in society. We are afraid to walk down a different side of the road from the one that is created for us and by the society we live in. We are afraid!

As a consequence of our fear we have watered down the gospel message and so we call the reading for today "The Parable of the Good Samaritan" and condensed its message into doing acts of kindness for strangers. We equate it to stopping to help someone on the side of the road when they are out of gas or giving our leftovers to First United in downtown Vancouver. This is not very radical! This is not a message that will turn the world upside down!

So, knowing that Jesus was a radical with a radical message, let us look for the radical message that was meant to turn the world upside down. Lets look for the real message of surprise and shock that would leave the “teacher of the law” reeling in disbelief. Let’s look for that message that will set our thinking and way of being in the world upside down.

The text begins innocently enough. An expert in Mosaic Law – a Bible scholar – sets out to test Jesus with a standard question: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” In other words, how can I get to heaven? Jesus, the wise teacher, answers the question with two of his own questions: “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” To which the lawyer responds by quoting from the law: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself” (Deut. 6:5 & Lev. 19:18). It is a good answer. In fact, according to Jesus this lawyer has given the right answer. “Do this,” he says, “and you will live.” In other words, Jesus says that - loving God completely and loving neighbour as self - makes eternal life a reality in the here and now. Unsatisfied, the lawyer presses Jesus for more. He asks Jesus a more dangerous question: “And who is my neighbour?” It is a dangerous question because it invites an answer in the form of a parable.

Parables are trouble. We often portray parables as object lessons, children’s stories, the gospel for dummies. This is a mistake. Parables are explosive devices, timed to go off when Jesus is well down the road towards the next village. Just two chapters earlier in Luke’s gospel the confused disciples ask Jesus about the meaning of a parable. In reply Jesus says: “To you it has been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God; but to others I speak in parables so that ‘looking they may not perceive, and listening they may not understand’” (Lk. 8:10). Jesus’ parables intend to confuse, to confound, to function more like riddles than solutions. Once parables have lost their capacity to upset and to invert the “real world” it is as if they have been unplugged. Their high voltage is reduced to a gentle buzz. They are no longer outrageous and dangerous but now they are acceptable and unchallenging.

Not one of Jesus’ parables has become more acceptable, has lost more of it’s voltage, than ‘The Parable of the Good Samaritan.’ Everyone knows that a Good Samaritan is a stranger who stops to offer help. That’s the accepted definition of a Good Samaritan. Yet this was not the intent of either Jesus or Luke. The Samaritan is the last of three travellers who come upon a groaning, beaten-up victim on the roadside. A priest and a Levite pass by. It is a standard formula. But let suppose Jesus was telling that story today. Who might the characters be? How might Jesus address some of our lax ways?

One day at a town hall meeting, a university student stood up with a question to put Jesus on the spot. “Teacher, please tell me how I can be saved. How can I spend eternity in heaven?”

Jesus answered him, “What does God say about that? And how do you understand it?” The man replied, “That you love God with all your passion and muscle and intelligence –

and that you love your neighbor as much as you love yourself.” “Good answer!” said Jesus. “Do it and you will know joy, freedom and life abundant!” Looking for a loophole, the student asked, “And just how would you define neighbour?”

Jesus answered with a story. One day a man was travelling from Vancouver to Surrey when his car broke down. He managed to get it over to the side of the road when another car stopped and two men got out. They pulled the man out of his car and beat him, stabbed him, took his wallet and cell phone and left him for dead.

Luckily, a United Church minister was driving by and so he slowed down. But when he saw the man hanging part way out of his car with bloody wounds, he sped away. He had a church meeting to go to after all, and he didn't want to get involved.

The next car to go by was a Social Worker who was a government employee, but he barely slowed down enough to take a look. “It is probably a trap and someone is just faking these injuries,” he said to himself. “Any way I need to get home for dinner.”

Then an Arab who was a Muslim came upon the man. When he saw the condition of the man he felt compassion for him. He parked his car, moved the man the rest of the way out of his car and put pressure on his wounds to stop the bleeding as he called 911. He tried to make him as comfortable as possible and spoke words of encouragement to him. When the ambulance arrived, he offered to drive with the man to the hospital. The next day he went to the hospital to visit the man and offered him further assistance. He also explained that he had his car towed and it was presently being fixed at no expense to the wounded man.

“What do you think? Which one of the three became a neighbor to the man who was attacked and left to die on the side of the road?”

The one who treated him kindly, the university student responded.

Jesus said, “Go and do the same.”

Shocking eh? The people we expect to help do not. The one we do not expect to help does help and goes beyond what we would expect. The ones who “passed by,” are both helping professionals, and you would expect that they would stop and give assistance but they do not.

However, there is a double punch to Jesus parable. According to Amy-Jill Levine, the Orthodox Jew who has written the book, "The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus," this is where we go wrong. She says that Christians regularly misread this parable by assuming that Jewish law prevents the priest and Levite from stopping to help. They are off the hook, so to speak. Not so, she says, priests and Levites became unclean all the time and there were rituals for cleansing. Levine says that in Jesus' Jewish world the parable is a set-up for the third traveller – a lay person, a common peasant. The peasant is not ordained or commissioned. The audience is waiting for Jesus to give it to the holier than thou priests and Levites, when

the third traveller turns out to be a regular lay person who lends this poor stranger a helping hand.

Now here comes the second punch. Watch out. Take cover. Jesus is now lighting the fuse on the stick of dynamite that will explode this parable. It is not just a peasant layperson who arrives on the scene. It is a Samaritan peasant. The Samaritan is not simply an outsider, not simply of a different ethnic background, not simply a total stranger. Samaritans and Jews have history. It is bitter. There are painful memories. There are deep wounds, old scars. They are rivals immersed in a long-running feud. Both claim to be the true descendants of Abraham. Both claim to worship God in the only acceptable way in the only acceptable place. They do not like each other!

Just a few verses earlier in Luke's gospel (And we should always look at what comes before and after a story if we are trying to glean its message,) James and John are eager to call down fire on a Samaritan village (Lk. 9:51-55) because they are not being hospitable. On another occasion when Jesus meets a Samaritan woman at a well the narrator notes matter-of-factly: "Jews have no dealings with Samaritans." (Jn. 4:9) So now when Jesus says the "S" word, those listening react - faces turn red, heart rates increase, stomachs churn. In the world of the Jew during this time, the word "Good," and the word "Samaritan," could not be used together. It is a contradiction in terms. If the point of the story is simply to help the stranger in need then it will tell of a wounded Samaritan in the ditch and a Jewish lay person coming to the rescue. Instead the parable requires us to entertain the impossible and, in so doing, to witness the kingdom of God breaking open the world to reveal a new world where God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

So there is the one-two punch! The expected paid professionals do not help. They change lanes and keep on going. It is a layperson who helps and not only is he a layperson but not only is he a lay person but, he is from a rival ethnic group. Boom! The explosion!

Jesus doesn't ask: "Do you believe this could happen?" He asks: "Who proved to be a neighbour to the one who fell into the hands of robbers?" The dynamite explodes the moment we blurt out: "The one who showed compassion." This Samaritan who you see as beneath you is the one building God's kingdom. Then Jesus answers the answer with a new commandment: "Go and do likewise." Now we are charged to turn the world upside down!

Luke does not tell us about the people's reaction to this parable. We do not know what the lawyer or the disciples or the crowd say or do in response. They are likely so dumbfounded that they are left utterly speechless. Yet the parable cannot come as a total surprise. Twice already in Luke's gospel Jesus has commanded his apprentices to "love your enemy." Jesus turns the category of enemy on its head. 'The Parable of the Good Samaritan' - is enemy love in action. The problem is we do not want to love our enemies. So we reduce 'The Parable of the Good Samaritan' to a cliché, turning it into an uplifting good neighbour vignette, no longer an explosive challenge to the world.

“Go and do likewise,” says Jesus, adopt this Samaritan’s way of thinking. Imagine a world - in which we treat the people who hold different theological, political and ideological ideas, with extravagant love and compassion! Imagine a world where we related to different ethnic groups without prejudices and racism! How would our relationship be different if they were on the receiving end of abundant grace rather than of snide remarks and degrading jokes. Imagine the world where those with different skin colour or social status are not bad-mouthed or shunned or derided but loved generously, overwhelmingly into wholeness.

In truth, the church largely ignores Jesus’ admonition to love with abundant generosity across enemy lines. We are afraid of being radical. We are afraid of the cost. We are afraid of losing people. We are afraid of losing donors. We are afraid of looking bad in society. We are afraid! Needless to say if we did this, that is, followed the teaching of this one parable, the world would be turned upside down! Imagine! It would be a new world that would resemble God’s kingdom. And this is our call!

This week I heard that the people of Attawapiskat raised \$5000.00 to help the people from Fort Mac Murray. Insert their name into the Good Samaritan story! Wow! What a message! Furthermore, a group of Syrian Refugees have raised a large amount of money for the people of Fort Mac Murray. Insert their name into the Good Samaritan story! Shocking!

This gospel bears an extraordinary message in a world riven with battle lines - battle lines between nations, battle lines between religions, battle lines within families, battle lines within the church. It is an awesome thing to say ‘yes’ to this message, to this ministry, to this God we meet in Jesus. It will turn your world upside down. Putting the love of enemies into practice is guaranteed to cost. And yet as disciples of Jesus we are called to this ministry. We are called to hear and recognize the cry of pain coming from the ditches of this world and it will not matter who it is that calls out in agony. Go and do likewise, Jesus says! Live the gospel! May God grant us the strength and will to do this!

AMEN.