

RESTART COMPASSION

Luke 10:25-37

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My job would be so much easier if I could edit Jesus' words every now and then. It would be a heck of a lot easier to encourage people to join the church and support the church if I could change a few things. I would love, for example, to be able to say, "Follow Jesus and your life will become much more comfortable." Instead, I read what Jesus actually said, which was, "If anyone wants to be my disciple, they must deny themselves, and take up their cross, and follow me." That's a hard message to sell.

I would love to be able to stand up here and say, "If you follow Jesus, all of your relationships will instantly improve." But what Jesus actually said was, "Don't think I've come to make life cozy. Well-meaning family members can be your worst enemies. If you prefer father or mother over me, son or daughter over me, you don't deserve me." No one wants to hear that.

I wish I could re-tell the parable of the Good Samaritan in my own words. I wish I could say that this is a parable meant to reinforce the way we want the world to be. Let's say you're the one stuck by the side of the road with a flat tire, a cell phone with no reception, and a crying baby in the back seat. Let's say that the first two people who pass you by are people you're inclined not to like. Someone super-rich, let's say, whooshing by in a very expensive sports car. It's fun to make fun of rich people, isn't it? And let's say the second person who passes you by, without stopping, is a ...oh, who is it easy to dismiss these days? An illegal immigrant? A drug dealer? Someone like

that. But the person who stops to help you is the person driving a Prius with a UCC bumpersticker. He's on his way to a meeting at church, but he's early because he's pretty much perfect, and so he stops and helps you. He calls AAA and waits with you until the tow truck arrives. And I would end the parable by saying, "And that's why all of you should join and support the Avon Lake United Church of Christ because we're the people who help everyone. Amen."

But the parable Jesus actually told has a very different message. It starts with a question, and with the person asking the question.

It's a very human question, which is why we cringe when we hear it. It may not be a question we've asked out loud, but many of us have asked it in our own hearts and minds. At least, I confess, I have. It's a question that says, "What's the least I can do?" Do you know that question? "God, I want to be a good person, but I don't want to give up my comfortable life. What's the least I can do?" Few of us ask, "God, help me structure my life in a way that I can give the very most away, and still survive and be healthy...the most money, the most time."

This man is asking Jesus: just put it plainly. I want to get to heaven. What are the requirements? A student who doesn't love a class just wants to know what it will take to get a B. She doesn't care about getting an A, or about winning some prize in physics; she just wants to get the B. "How hard do I have to study on the test? How much time do I have to allot? I don't want to learn physics really; I just want to get through it and get the B." It's that kind of question. "What do I have to do, Jesus, to get to heaven? What's the least I have to do? Let me know and I'll get it done."

Jesus can't answer that, because Jesus is a good and faithful Jew, and Jesus knows the Torah, the scriptures. The scriptures say that God gives eternal life as a gift, but the scriptures don't focus on eternal life. They focus on the here and now, on how to live in the present. Good Jews follow the commandments not because they have to, but because they want to. They are grateful for all that God has given and has promised. They are grateful for God's presence, for God's very being, and they respond by living as God wants them to live.

Jesus says to the questioner, "What does the scripture say?" The man knows his scripture too, and he responds correctly. He says, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself." "You've got it," Jesus says. And you almost imagine Jesus walking away, or preparing to answer someone else's question. But he's interrupted once again by the man. "Wait a minute! But who's my neighbor?" He's looking for a loophole, Eugene Peterson tells us in the Message version of the Bible. He's really asking, "Who's NOT my neighbor? Who doesn't deserve my love? Whose lack of food or shelter can I ignore?" He's really asking, "Who can I hate?" In the first Tuesday book club last month, we studied a book (Short Stories by Jesus, by Amy-Jill Levine) on the parables written by a Jewish scholar who teaches New Testament. She says that the answer Jesus gives the man is this one. And this is the kind of thing that doesn't bring people in in droves, the kind of answer that makes it so hard to be a follower, a disciple of Jesus. The answer Jesus gives is this. "Who is my neighbor? Everyone. Everyone deserves love, local or alien, Jews or gentile, terrorist or rapist, everyone."

Now that's a hard message to hear. Hard to hear after this week's news. It doesn't mean we condone evil actions. It does mean that we regard everyone as a human being.

And to illustrate his teaching, he tells this story. A man is walking from Jerusalem to Jericho. It was an 18-mile rocky path, known to be a dangerous road. While walking that path, the man is beaten and robbed and left on the side of the road. He needs help, from someone, anyone. He's in luck, we think, as we hear Jesus telling the story, because a religious official is coming. A priest, who knows the law, and so he'll stop and help. But he doesn't. But wait, there's another religious official coming; a Levite who works in the temple. Surely he'll help the man. But he doesn't. Before we sneer and scoff too much, before we call them hypocrites, let's recall the times we haven't extended a hand in love, especially when no one else was watching. Let's consider the occasions when we have said, "If I stop to help, what will happen to me?" "If I write a large check, I won't have as much left for my own pleasure." "If I get involved, it'll complicate my life."

We know why they didn't stop. Because selfishness is a hard habit to break.

But Jesus isn't finished with his story. Someone else is coming down the road. We can't quite make out the face yet. Who will Jesus choose to be the hero in this story?

Well, he wants to make a point about compassion and about what it means to be a neighbor. The point is that compassion is to be shown to every human being, and that neighborliness has absolutely no bounds or borders. We are told to love our neighbor. Period. No exceptions. Jesus chooses as the hero of this story the person

his audience would least expect. Samaritans and Jews had a long-running religious feud. They were enemies, not likely to love one another anytime soon.

Who does Jesus choose as the hero of this story? A person who doesn't say, "If I stop to help what will happen to me?" but a person who is able to put aside selfishness and instead choose compassion and say, "If I don't stop to help, what will happen to this person?"

Who would it be for you? From whom would you most have trouble accepting compassion? From someone of another color? Another sexual orientation? Another religion? Another nationality? From someone who's committed a crime?

To whom do you have the most difficulty showing compassion?

Well, that's the person walking down the road. It's a rocky road, it's full of challenges, and risks. But when we walk the road of compassion, we're walking the Jesus road, the Jesus path, the way of life to which he invites us. If we want to be near him, we'll walk this road. It's never been a popular road, but that's ok. If we have Jesus, do we really need to worry about any other company?

He invites us to practice compassion, to those we know and to those we've been taught to hate. He invites us to practice compassion, so that the time of hatred will come to an end, and God's new reign of love and justice will be made a reality.