

THE CONTENT OF OUR CHARACTER: THE QUALITY OF OUR RELATIONSHIPS
Luke 10:25-37

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10 July 2022

Have you ever been around someone who was so charismatic that you felt almost magnetically attracted to him? Do you know someone whose spirit is so engaging, whose presence is so positive, that you never tire of spending time with her? Who do you know - or who have you known in your past - whom you felt loved you unconditionally, someone who accepted you for exactly who you are? Do you know someone wise, someone utterly trustworthy? Someone who can tell a good story in a captivating way?

That is the way the gospels describe Jesus. His personal presence was so powerful that stories were told about him for years before they were ever written and shared and collected. I can't think of anyone else in human history who had such a personal impact.

And many of us are in this room today because we have encountered Jesus ourselves. It is a mystical experience, something hard to describe, and it happens in different ways for different people. For some it's a feeling that bubbles up in an intense moment - on a mission trip, at church camp, while singing or listening to music. For some it happens while being quiet and listening - you feel as if you have heard God speaking to you, nudging you in a particular direction. Some people say they have felt the presence of the universal Christ while in nature.

It hasn't happened for everyone, and some people are not open to it because of negative experiences with church in their past.

This week the words of the parable of the Good Samaritan were rumbling around in my brain, and I found myself wondering what it would have been like to have heard Jesus speak them. It is a brilliant story, full of surprises and lending itself to different interpretations.

The first surprise in this familiar story is this. The people you expect to help the person on the side of the road don't. Our expectations are shattered. The guy has been mugged, robbed, beaten, and left for dead. No one else in the story knows who he is, except that certainly he is a Jew. First a temple priest comes by and you'd think he would stop to help. He certainly knows the law, he knows what the law requires - charity and compassion - but he doesn't even look to see if he knows the man. He crosses to the other side of the road. Then one of the temple officials comes by - he too knows about the obligation to care for those in need - but, he also ignores the person in need.

Why did these two men not act in accordance with their values? They both knew what was right - Jesus makes that clear by calling them a priest and a levite. Neither of them can use ignorance as an excuse. Were they busy? Did they have somewhere else they were supposed to be? Do we call them hypocrites? People who claim to be religious but who really are not transformed? People who say one thing and do another?

What do you think would have happened if other people had been present? The way Jesus tells the story, there are no onlookers. What if there had been? Do you think the priest and the levite would have made sure to do the right thing if others were watching them?

All I know is this. I've been in those shoes. I don't always live the faith I proclaim. Sometimes I'm tired, sometimes I'm just not at my best. Sometimes I feel very much the

way Paul did when he wrote, “The things I do are not the things I really want to be doing...and the things I end up doing are not really the best.” We don’t always make the right decisions, do we? Especially when no one else is watching. When no one’s there to notice, to thank you, to compliment you, to take your picture, to tell others about it.

This is a truth about human life that we don’t like to talk about, but Jesus believes in telling the truth. Jesus holds this story up in front of us like a mirror, not so that we’ll feel terrible about ourselves, not so that we’ll feel guilty, but just as a way of saying, “I know that you screw up like this sometimes too. I love you anyway.” That love, he knew, will motivate us to do better next time.

Now our attention shifts to the crime victim, lying on the side of the road. Imagine what it’s like to be him. You’re in and out of consciousness, you’re barely aware of what’s happened to you, you know you’re in need of help. You may or not know that two people from your church have just passed you by - first one of your ministers, and then one of the leaders serving on Church Council. Then you’re aware that someone is rubbing your face with a cool cloth. Someone is gently lifting your head and offering you a sip of water. And then, slowly and carefully, this person is helping you stagger to the back of their vehicle. You fall back asleep for a moment and then you hear this person say, “There’s an ER five miles from here. You’re going to be fine. I’ll make sure you get the help you need.” And he does. He checks you in, he gives his own name and cell phone as the emergency contact, and then he comes back the next day to make sure you’re ok. Who does that?

Well, the person you’d least expect. The person, in fact, that you would least WANT to help you. This requires some unpleasant honesty on our part as well. I don’t know who it be for you. A person of a different race? Or religion? A person who blatantly

holds the exact opposite political views? The old boss who once fired you? A relative you haven't talked to in years? A friend who ghosted you, just stopped responding to your calls, someone from whom you're estranged and you never really knew why?

You wake up the next morning, feeling better, realizing that you're alive, that your injuries are not as severe as you feared. It all comes back to you. And then you remember who it was who helped you. You might be appalled, repulsed even, if you're honest. And grateful at the same time. Kindness is kindness, mercy is mercy. You receive it as a gift.

This story shows us what it means to love when no one is watching. Jesus tells this story to show us what it means to love without expecting anything in return.

It's the most radical kind of love there is.

The way we treat others when no one else is watching shows our character. Acting in love towards people even when it cannot benefit us...acting in love towards people even when it costs us something...that determines our character.

I'm going to close by sharing this video. As you'll see, it was made a little over 10 years ago, but I still find it moving and hope you do too.

<https://www.worshiphousemedia.com/mini-movies/20303/who-is-my-neighbor>