

March 1, 2025
Luke 10:25-37
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In Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s last speech before being assassinated, he spoke about the story of the Good Samaritan that was just acted out so beautifully for us this morning. In his speech, Dr. King told the audience that he visited the Jericho Road in 1959. He made note of the twists and turns in the road as it wound through the hills and sank into the valley outside Jerusalem. All those twists and turns created many places for robbers to hide, awaiting weary travelers. He said that he imagined, as the priest and the Levite traveled that road, they were afraid of what was around the next corner.

To be honest, I've never given much thought to their reasons for passing by the wounded man. In my mind, they were the clear villains in the story and not worth spending much time thinking about. Jerks. But then I found myself preaching a sermon series called "Everything [in] Between and wondered if maybe I am the jerk for writing them off and acting as if my own fear has never kept me from doing the right thing. Has fear ever kept you from doing the right thing? How did that make you feel?

The church I served as an associate when we lived in IL was a downtown church located across the street from a shelter for people experiencing homelessness. We had a washer and dryer in the church that was used a lot by people living at the shelter, so there were people in and out of the building all the time. It wasn't uncommon for folks to come in on Sunday mornings and grab a donut and some coffee and leave. One Sunday, someone came in the building as worship was starting and asked for me. I was getting my robe on when one of the elders came to my office and said someone was asking for me and the person looked a little rough around the edges.

I had been getting angry phone calls for taking the side of people who were living in tents not far from the church, so the idea that someone was at the church asking for me unsettled me a little bit. I told the elder to tell the person I was getting ready for worship and ask them to call and make an appointment Monday. I knew in real-time that I wasn't doing the right thing. In other words, as I made the wrong choice, I was already beating myself up for allowing fear to keep me from doing the right thing. That is not a pleasant feeling.

Having the opportunity to reflect on this has reminded me that every person in every story is a person, even the ones who make mistakes, even the ones who do awful things. When he talked about the priest and the Levite, Dr. King imagined that they fearfully asked themselves, "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?" He suggested that we should be asking a different question. Instead of wondering what will happen to ourselves, we should be asking, "If I do not stop to help this man, what

will happen to him?" In the story of the Good Samaritan, the answer to the first question, "What will happen to me," is uncertain. Maybe the robber is still lurking around and will attack me. Maybe the wounded person will hurt me or take advantage of my generosity." Maybe.

But the answer to the other question, "What will happen to the wounded man?" is certain. If he doesn't receive help, he will likely die or at the very least, his suffering will increase. Concern for myself and all those "maybes" suddenly makes me seem even more like a jerk. But sometimes I'm not a jerk. Sometimes I do the right thing. Sometimes I sacrifice my own well-being for the well-being of others. I am not one or the other, I am both, and I bet you are too. Why? Because we are human beings. But sometimes we forget that, about ourselves and other people.

One day a legal expert stood up to test Jesus and asked, Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus replied, "What is written in the law? How do you read it?" The expert answered, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself." "You've answered correctly," Jesus said. "Do this, and you will live." But the expert, wanting to justify himself, asked, "And who is my neighbor?"

So Jesus told this story:

A drag queen, dressed in a new dress, matching high heels, and a killer wig, was changing her tire along the highway when she was attacked by a group of thieves. They beat her up, took her purse, and phone, and left her lying on the side of the road, bleeding and barely conscious.

A well-known pastor happened to be driving by. He saw the Queen, but didn't want to get involved---he was late for a meeting at church. So, he changed lanes and kept driving.

Later, a politician, who often spoke of family values and proclaimed himself pro-life, saw the Queen and hesitated. But he worried that whoever had attacked the woman was still hanging around, so he too, drove past.

Then, a man with a red hat and a t-shirt that said, "Make America Great Again," on his way home from the shooting range, saw the Queen lying on the side of the road. He felt deep compassion for her. Ignoring the risks, he pulled over, got out of his pick-up, and knelt beside her. He cleansed her wounds with the first aid kit he had in the truck and wrapped her injuries the best he could.

He helped her into his truck and drove her to a nearby clinic. When the receptionist, complete with judgmental eyes and an attitude, started to turn them away because the Queen didn't have insurance, the man stepped in and said, "Please help her. I will cover the cost." The man needed to pick his son up from school, so he left his credit

card with the receptionist, saying he would be back to settle up after he took his son home.

Jesus looked at the legal expert and asked, "Which of these three was a neighbor to the drag queen who was attacked?" The expert muttered, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus nodded. "Go and do likewise."

Life is messy, isn't it? I can see by your faces that my little retelling made you uncomfortable. The level of discomfort you are feeling is exactly how the author of Luke's original audience would have felt. It would have made them very uncomfortable that the person who, as far as they were concerned, was the villain in any story they were part of was the hero in this story. How can that be? Because human beings are messy. Because human beings are more often "both/and" than they are either/or."

Things would be a lot more clear cut if we could put people in their little groups and leave them there, wouldn't it? That doesn't work because just when we think we have everyone sorted, someone does something to mess it all up. Just when we think all ministers are good people, one molests a child. Just when we think all politicians are liars, Forrest Bennett shows up and tells us the truth. Just when we think everyone who voted differently than we did doesn't care about anything but their stocks, one shows up and helps the drag queen. We are all more than one thing and more than one way.

And to make things even messier, you should know that there are other ministers using this same retelling of the story today and some of them are putting the man with the red hat in the place of the wounded man. So, for those congregations, the minister has decided it would be more shocking to his/her congregation for a drag queen to be the helper than for the man with the red hat to be the helper. Now that is some messiness.

This is such a great story. It invites us to see ourselves in these characters. I bet there are days when it's really easy to see ourselves as the wounded one by the side of the road. Other days, maybe most days, we see ourselves passing by opportunities to help the ones who are suffering. On our best days, though, "moved with compassion," we risk it all, swallow our fear, and do what needs to be done to help, even as others run the other way. I think that isn't just true for us. It's true for most people. We all have days when we show up in big ways for other people.

Do you remember how this story starts? It starts with the law expert asking what he must do to inherit eternal life. And then Jesus does what Jesus does...

Instead of dwelling on how to get to heaven which was not a thing for Jesus which should make us wonder why Christians have been so fixated on that, instead of dwelling on that, Jesus tells a story about how we are supposed to treat each other

right here in this life. Never mind your angels and harps sitting around on clouds, never mind your book that names who is in and who is out...never mind your streets paved with gold. Let's talk about the very real streets right here that run through neighborhoods full of people who are suffering.

Let's talk about that. Dr. King privately told a friend once, "I of course like and respect the Good Samaritan. I am tired of seeing people battered and bruised and bloody...I want to pave the Jericho Road, add streetlights to the Jericho Road, make the Jericho Road safe for passage by everybody." His point of course is that he would rather deal with what causes people to end up wounded by the side of the road in the first place than continuing to be called on to triage the ones who are suffering.

Poverty and wealth disparity are very often the reasons people steal.

Xenophobia, racism, and bigotry are very often the reasons we fear our neighbors and think of them as strangers. Let's solve these problems and save so many from their suffering.

These aren't small problems. They are problems that require all hands on deck to solve. Earlier I mentioned that Dr. King imagined the priest and the Levite asking themselves, "What will happen to me if I stop to help the man?" He suggested that the question, "What will happen to him if I don't stop to help?" is a better question. I think he's right, but I think there is another question we need to ask and answer. "What will happen to *me* if I don't stop to help?" You see, human beings are wired for community. We are not born fearing people. We are taught that. And when we allow ourselves to again and again and again act on that fear, we little by little by little become less...less human. And just as the consequence for the man by the side of the road is death if I don't stop to help. In some ways, the same is true for me. Allowing fear to keep me from showing compassion for other people will not lead to life, eternal or otherwise; it only leads to death.

The story of the Compassionate Samaritan reminds us that putting one another in groups based on what we think we know about each other doesn't always serve us very well. It reminds us that there is a whole lot of in between in between stranger and neighbor. It reminds us that on any given day, we can be either or both. But wherever we are and whoever we are, God is there.

I will end this morning with a poem. It is called "Never a Stranger, it was written by Rev. Sarah Are Speed.

When we talk about God, we say
she's never met a stranger.
She makes friends at the airport.
She waves to babies in the check-out line.
When we talk about God, we say
she'll leave the porch light on.

She'll have warm bread in the oven.
She'll have all the time in the world.
When we talk about God, we say
she'll look you in the eye.
She'll love you as you are.
She'll call you by your name.
When we talk about God,
we never have to talk about
which side of the road she might walk down.
Wherever you are,
that's where she'll be.
Amen.