

Tracy Daub  
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Luke 10:25-37

## LOST AND FOUND

The eight people who rushed into an intersection to stop a runaway car have been hailed as “Good Samaritans.” When the driver of the car suffered a medical emergency and her vehicle began to roll into the busy intersection, a small group of people sprang into action. Jumping from their own cars, they rushed forward and used their combined force to stop the moving vehicle. And then they were able to call for emergency help for the slumped over driver. The whole incident was caught on video and quickly went viral, turning the individuals involved into national celebrities. One of the rescuers responded to all the attention stating, “I feel like I just did what anyone would do.” And yet, they have certainly not been treated like anyone. Each of the rescuers was awarded a Royal Caribbean cruise and a gift card for \$2,000 for their extraordinary action.

“Good Samaritan” is the term we use for those individuals who come to the aid of a stranger in need. And that term derives from the parable Jesus tells in our reading today about the Samaritan who responded to the injured man on the road when no one else would. According to the story Jesus tells, two upstanding religious leaders are the first to see the injured man. But each of them actively avoids encountering the injured man by crossing to the other side of the street. Jesus doesn’t tell us why. We are left to speculate. What could be the reasons they crossed to the other side of the street and avoided helping the man? (sharing of thoughts)

One possibility is fear. Perhaps they were afraid it was a trap, that maybe the guy was a robber pretending to be hurt and would then jump up and rob them.

Perhaps they were concerned about ritual purity. If these two Jewish leaders thought the man was dead, then they might have been concerned about the belief in their culture that touching the dead body would make themselves impure.

Maybe they were in a hurry, too busy with their own agendas.

Any of these are possibilities. We aren't told the reason, so we can't know for sure. But what we can know is that these first two travelers did not feel a sense of connection with the man lying on the side of the road. If that person had been their mother, their father, their child, their sister or brother, their close friend, then they would almost certainly have rushed to the injured person and offered assistance. But they could pass by only because they did not feel any connection, any tie, any responsibility for the injured man. They were "unrelated" to him. And thus, when they pass by, these two leaders reveal something significant about themselves. They revealed that they had lost their sense of humanity. Our sense of humanity is when we recognize that we are not only human but we are also humane—creatures who act with compassion, who act in ways that benefit others. Our sense of humanity is when we remember our ties with one another.

We don't have to look very far to see how people have lost their sense of humanity, their sense of connection with one another. We see the stories of warfare, mass shootings, racism, neglect, abuse, greed, and selfishness in our daily news. The deepening political divide within our nation has polarized us to the point where people regard one another with suspicion and outright hatred, to the point where people can take up arms, storm our nation's Capitol building, and call for the murder of the Vice-President. Such feelings are only possible when we have lost our sense of humanity, the sense that we are all connected in important and even sacred ways.

If being a decent human being is considered extraordinary, if those who stopped the runaway car are showered with expensive rewards for their actions, if the person who returns the lost wallet is hailed as hero, if being a decent human being is considered extraordinary, then we are truly damaged goods. We have lost something precious. We have lost our God-given humanity. And we are in need of rescuing.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is a lesson in the recovery of our humanity. And it invites us to ponder about what gets in the way. What gets in the way of your living into your full humanity—the person of compassion, grace, generosity, and justice whom God created? What gets in the way of your honoring the humanity of others? Fear? Busy schedule? Ideological differences? Bitterness or anger? Indifference? Prejudice? Human beings have always been in danger of losing our humanity to forces and obstacles within us and outside of us. That's really what that old fashioned word "sin" is all about. Sin is when we lose our way, when we lose our humanity. And we need help in finding our way back.

The parable Jesus tells is not only about the importance of assisting the stranger in need. Central to this story's message is also *who* extends the compassion. The parable specifically identifies the person who helps as a *Samaritan*—a group for whom Jewish people held great animosity, a person who Jewish people would shun. A despised person, a rejected person, becomes the very source of guiding us back to our humanity.

But what if this parable is not just about the Samaritan? What if Jesus is telling a story about himself? Think about it: a despised person, a rejected person, becomes the one to help us recover our humanity. When Jesus joined us in this earthly experience, he taught us with parables like the one he tells today, through his own acts of compassion and care, and through his own sacrifice of love. He taught us what it means to be fully human. And over and over

again, we discover that to be fully human includes honoring our deep connection with God and our deep connection with one another.

The passage we read today begins with Jesus rehearsing that very lesson: honoring God and honoring our neighbor. A lawyer asks Jesus what it takes to have eternal life. And Jesus asks him, “Well, what does the law say?” And the lawyer recites the commandment to love God with all one’s heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love one’s neighbor as yourself. And then, only after the lawyer wonders, “who is my neighbor?” does Jesus tell the parable.

I think this is an interesting point. Our passage today first begins with an external law. Do these things, Jesus tells us. Love God. Love neighbor. The text begins with an external law. And then the passage shifts to an *internal embodiment* of that law: the story of the Good Samaritan who embodied that law with his act of compassion.

Perhaps faith is an acquired skill—something like playing the piano. We practice it by following various external principles or steps with the goal that one day, one day this skill will be completely internalized and we will no longer have to think about what we do or how we act. Like the Good Samaritan, who just jumped in and helped. Like Jesus, whose life and death embodied what it means to be human.

That’s what the faith community can do for one another. We help each other practice. We gather together to recall the law God has given us: to love God and to love one another. And through our actions, our prayers, our efforts, we strive to practice this law so that it will become as natural to us as breathing. We practice being human.

According to what God says in the passage from Deuteronomy, following God’s commandments to love God and our neighbor is not some impossible task. No, according to what God says in Deuteronomy, walking God’s way and living out our full humanity is very near

to you and to me. God says, “it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.” And that means that, with God’s help, in walking God’s ways, what was lost *can* be found. It is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.

Robert Carolla was 11 years old in 1953 when his younger brother died of leukemia. Six weeks after his brother died a letter arrived in the mail from his brother’s doctor. In the letter the doctor offered his heartfelt condolences in a very touching way. When friends would come by the house, Robert’s mother would get out the letter and show it to them. It was read and re-read and re-read. And the family found such great comfort in the doctor’s care and compassion for them.

When Robert grew up, he too became a doctor. One day when he was a medical intern working in the hospital, the doctor who had cared for his brother saw his nametag and stopped him and remembered who he was and his little brother who had died. And Robert decided that was the kind of doctor *he* wanted to be. And so Robert took up the same habit of writing a letter of condolence to the family of patients who died. One day he was contacted by the husband of one of his patients—a woman who had died 12 years earlier. The husband was now dying of cancer and wanted to see Robert before he died. So Robert went to the man’s home. And when he entered the house, he saw the letter he had written to the man 12 years earlier framed and hanging on the wall. And he understood the power that resided in that piece of paper.

A gesture of humanity considered extraordinary by the world’s standards. The actions of a Good Samaritan caring for strangers in need. According to God, humanity is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.