

LOVE AS COMPASSION

Luke 10: 25-37

Years ago a ministry colleague told me this story. She was asked to lead a worship service in the summer for a small rural congregation an hour's drive from her home. She got on the road with plenty of time to spare. But soon enough, she came upon some weekend construction. She had to slow down! After 15 minutes she started to panic! She was going to be late! Once she finally got past the construction she sped up. She was determined to make it on time! Her partner, also in the car with her, told her to slow down. There was plenty of time to get there. People would understand. Well, as they were having some back and forth about it all, they suddenly noticed a car pulled up on the side of the road and a person waving anyone passing by. This was a time before the proliferation of cell phones, so presumably the person had no phone to call for help. My colleague's partner told her to pull over. They had to help. Wasn't this the right thing to do? But my colleague was stressed about getting to the church. She was determined to get there on time. And so, she just kept driving.

They got to the church with a few minutes to spare. Great! She said some quick hellos and then proceeded to the front of the church. She got up to the pulpit and introduced herself. She then proceeded to tell the congregation about the theme of the worship service. And then, she froze. Had she forgotten something? No. Her theme was the 'Good Samaritan'. She was supposed to be preaching about the qualities of compassion the good Samaritan possessed, qualities that every Christian should aspire to develop. The good Samaritan was good because he stopped to help someone in desperate need. But she, the preacher, had just driven by. She had failed to stop to help someone in genuine need. Busted!

Now, even as she confessed her sin to the whole congregation and everyone had a good laugh, reassuring her that such things happen to everyone, there was also an important lesson in all this. My colleague was so stressed, distracted and determined by an agenda to get to the church on time, she was not available emotionally and practically to where the need was greatest. Even though she should have stopped to help, and explain to the congregation later why she was late or even why she had missed the service altogether, she was far too distanced from her heart and what was right to make a good decision in the moment. Her decision making was stress-based, not love-based. Has this ever happened to you? Have you ever made a bad decision

because you were emotionally disconnected from being present at the heart level in a situation of need? I have... more than once. Whether it's stress or fear, whether we're far too absorbed with our own needs or plain distracted, we fail all too often to live out the love to which we are called as human beings.

And so, we come to church. We don't come to church because we pretend we're better than other people. We come to church to reground ourselves, to reset and to get inspiration to try again to live into the values that grow from love. We come here to learn how to discern again and again what love means in various situations and circumstances of our lives. We come here to get empowered again, and that also means we come here to confess before God, the ground of love, our failures to love. As we confess and release the failures, we clear the space within us to renew our commitment to love as Jesus revealed and embodied love. We seek new resurrection life in him by dying to what undermines love in our lives.

OK, so what can the story of the Good Samaritan teach us and inspire in us toward such love?

The first thing I want to say is that Jesus always tells stories with characters that are insiders and outsiders, those included and those excluded, excluded because they are deemed morally flawed sinners. The Samaritan is supposed to be a morally flawed sinner. Why? He is racially flawed. Samaritans have Jewish blood mixed with non-Jewish blood. That makes them mixed blood and therefore impure and flawed.

So, besides having a powerful message about love, this story also sticks it to all those Israelites (of whom Jesus is one), who not only hate Samaritans because they are Samaritans, but also justify hate as an expression of pure religion. Sound familiar? Racist hate, whether it's against Muslims, Jews, indigenous people, LGBTQI+ folk or people of colour, often has a religious flavour to it. In the name of biblical religion, we're told, people must be rejected, unless they become like us. Their difference from us and how they live those differences in their lives are condemned. We can pretend to love the sinner in them, but we spend a lot of energy hating their sin, so much so, we abuse them with our judgements and our behaviour. We take their children away and criticize their religious symbols as being repressive somehow. We judge their lifestyles too... Love is the last thing they experience from us.

So then, Jesus deliberately using a Samaritan as the good guy and two religious officials as the bad guys is really sticking it to the racial and religious purists of his people. When it comes to righteousness, he is declaring, it is the one who loves most

authentically who is righteous before God, not your blood line as a Levite or your religious profession as a priest.

OK, so what was it about the Samaritan's actions more specifically that makes him so righteous? We are told that the Samaritan's motive for stopping to help a man severely beaten and left for dead is this: he was "moved with compassion." What is this compassion all about? There are at least three qualities in the compassion that moves the Samaritan.

1) First, we're told that compassion itself moves him. The actual word in Biblical Greek is "*esplaxnisthe*." *Esplaxnisthe* is what happens to you when you witness something so terrible that it's like someone has punched you in the stomach and you can't breathe. It's like your insides are twisted and turned and you need to lean against the wall or sit down just to get your breathe back. The Samaritan has a total visceral reaction that breaks his heart in two when he sees a person so badly beaten and left for dead. Everything else on his agenda, everything else planned for his day, every potential risk, fear of harm, or burden of responsibility that he may be carrying, any stress... all of it goes out the window. He lets himself feel the full impact of what he is witnessing. Here is another human being, a child of God, a one-of-a-kind creation, cruelly treated, one who may very well die if left untended. He has to stop and help, whatever it takes.

So then, the first thing about compassion is that it's a matter of the heart. You have to feel it when you witness someone else's pain or trauma. Whether it's an innocent family run down and murdered because of their faith, or hundreds of children discarded and buried to be forgotten, or any other situation more personal to us still, how much do we allow ourselves to feel it, and how much does such feeling compel us to respond to the situation somehow? Regardless of what we can and cannot do, the first thing about compassion is the opening of our hearts to feel. We are created by God to feel like this. This is the highest call in our lives and the most important source of our personal fulfillment. To numb ourselves, distract ourselves or block ourselves from feeling compassion will undermine any fullness we can truly experience in life. The Samaritan has no blocks to feeling deeply and viscerally for the wounded man.

2) Second, the Samaritan's compassion causes him to be available. Whatever else he's got going on, whatever else he's got planned, whatever else could distract him or take away his focus, he becomes completely available to the wounded man. Everything else is set aside. Everything else is put on the shelf. Compassion requires he make himself completely available. How available are you and I to the needs of another? Availability requires a change of plans. It requires time. It requires focus. The Samaritan stops. He

takes the time to pour oil and wine on the man's wounds, disinfecting and anesthetizing them. He bandages the man. He gently places him on his donkey and walks him all the way to an inn where he gets a room and arranges for more healing supplies. He pays the innkeeper and arranges for help to come in while he goes off to take care of some business. He promises to come back and pay up whatever expenses are incurred to care for the man until he is well enough to leave. Wow!

Obviously, we all have our limits. Obviously we cannot take care of everyone and we cannot be available all the time. There are things we need to take care of for ourselves, our family, our work, other things we are responsible for, and we need time for self-care too... But the story of the good Samaritan teaches us if we let it, that it's not enough to give a handout or some money or shed a tear here and there. Beyond the guttural response of feeling compassion we need to act compassionately by making ourselves available, otherwise the journey of compassion and the transformation of compassion cannot be complete. How available are you and I to the call of compassion?

3) Finally, beyond the guttural feeling for the need of another and making ourselves available to another's need, compassion requires that we pay attention. Availability is practical and that's important and necessary. But attention is a quality of the heart. As you let yourself feel the impact of what is happening to someone, and as you make yourself available to their need, the final step is to actually pay attention to what it is they need not just practically, but in their heart and soul. Do they need someone to cry with them, to listen to them, really listen to them without judgement, without jumping to advice or solutions, without trying to make it better than it is, but just being present and paying attention? Attention is not concentration. Concentration is an effort of the will. When you concentrate you are expending mental effort. Paying attention, on the other hand is an opening and a listening with the heart. Creating space within yourself to hear and receive, in silence and with just enough words to mediate the compassionate presence necessary for inner healing to begin to happen... Paying attention to another who is in pain and need is equivalent to mediating God's compassionate presence to them. The Holy Spirit flows through us into them and begins some healing inner work.

'What does loving your neighbour as yourself mean?' the lawyer asks Jesus. By using an illustration of a hated Samaritan, Jesus declares that one who is "moved with compassion" at the misfortune and suffering of another, one who makes themselves radically available to the need, and one who pays profound attention to that need by being radically present at the heart level... Such a one truly loves their neighbour as

themselves. And this, Jesus declares, is what we are all called to grow into. With all our imperfections and limitations, all our fears, all our own burdens and cares, all those reasons we numb ourselves from feeling for the suffering and need of others, the reasons we are not available for others, and the reasons we are far too stressed, rushed, burdened or distracted to pay real attention to others, may we open ourselves anew to be shifted and turned, and slowly transformed so that we become the hands, feet and heart of the risen Christ in this world... Just like the Samaritan... Amen.

Let us pray: Come upon us, O God, each and every one of us. Fill us with your love. Open our hearts to the need of others. Take away our fear that we will be overwhelmed and swallowed up. Teach us to trust the journey of compassion until we become practiced in making ourselves more available and more ready to pay attention... In Jesus' name, Amen.