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Luke 10:25-37
Loving outside the lines

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be reflections of your word to us in Christ Jesus.

I fell into a trap that preachers sometimes fall into, which is having an idea of what I want to preach on before I read the text. Most of us don't need to read the story of the Good Samaritan to remember how it goes. We remember it as a story that teaches us about being loving and caring of our neighbours, even when it comes at a cost to us; it's something that we as Christians do . . . and should be doing anyway; it's something that Gabrielians do without a second thought. I could stand here and tell you 10 stories off the top of my head about how this community cares for each other and I know you could too. The one that still moves me to tears is when we found out there were kids coming to school hungry, some community members went to PHC and worked with them to just fix it. Because you can't learn when you're hungry. As I thought about the Good Samaritan as I remembered it, there wasn't a sermon in there, rather an affirmation of this incredible community.

Then I sat down and read the text and lo and behold that's not what the story's about. My memory was wrong. It was wrong because this is one of the most familiar stories of Jesus and Christians have simplified it, causing it to lose its depth without the cultural context. So, let's dig into it.

First, the lawyer. The lawyer is trying to trap Jesus into saying something heretical. Jesus responds by pointing out that the lawyer knows the answer to his own question because it's written in the law. To save face and make it sound like he hadn't asked a trivial question, the lawyer presses to the next question, "who is my neighbour?" (pause) Jesus often answers questions with parables; they make us think outside our context, they put us in the position of challenging our assumptions or worldview. To the lawyer, "God is the God of Israel, and neighbours are Jewish neighbours."¹ Knowing this about the lawyer, Jesus offers a parable, a hypothetical, set on a road known to be dangerous for travelers. The Priest and the Levi, aside from being human and born with the impulse to kindness God gives all of us,² are in a role where you would expect them to stop and help, even on a dangerous road. Being Temple officials, they also maintain ritual purity; they both decide it's more important to maintain this purity than to risk defiling themselves by touching a man who might very well be dead, so they cross the road and pass on the other side. One of the commentators pointed out that if the man had been dead, "such purity concerns would be insignificant compared to the weightier need to arrange for the burial of an exposed body."³ The two Temple officials are unwilling to assume the risks that go along with stopping to help someone in need. They choose God's law of purity over God's arguably more fundamental law of love.

¹ NT Wright, Luke for Everyone, 127.

² FOW Year C, vol. 3, 242

³ Ibid, 241.

It's important to note at this point that Jews and Samaritans don't like each other. In the context of the gospels, we hear about the Samaritans as non-Jews to whom Jesus reaches out, but the exact relationship between the two groups is seldom spelled out. The history of the conflict isn't exactly clear, but the presence of a Samaritan along this road would have been interpreted as the enemy. Hearing about a Samaritan helping along the road and going to the lengths he did to save the man's life would be a shock. If this Samaritan is neighbour to a Jew . . . this redefines neighbour. Remembering neighbour means something in the law – it's not a word that was pulled out of the air. Neighbours in the Jewish world are Jewish neighbours – their world is contained. But if this enemy is a **neighbour**, we might have to rethink the whole thing. What does it say about the limits of God's love? Jesus is pushing the boundaries of the Jewish understanding of God's love.

This story is about breaking down barriers between people and checking our assumptions about the other. It is about acknowledging where we have drawn lines of God's love and challenging those lines . . . learning to love outside those lines.

I watched a movie this week called *The Normal Heart*; it is a largely autobiographical account of the HIV/AIDS crisis in New York City in the early '80s. It is an imperfect illustration of this story however it resonates with me.

I had heard about the numbers and losses, but never before had I seen a first-hand account of what it was like - I watched the film stunned. The story opens in 1981 with a community of friends, one of whom shows a symptom here and there and then with a sudden, acute onset of symptoms, drops dead. Others show the virus differently with lesions and an overall decline of health over the next year or 2 before their death. Friends and partners stand over the dead frozen in disbelief. They come to realize that when the first lesion shows up, it's only a matter of time. The community loses friend after friend after friend . . . and there is nothing they can do to stop it because they don't know what it is or where it comes from. The character based on real-life David Geffen says, "When the first person I knew died, I couldn't bring myself to throw his Rolodex card away, so I saved it. (12 years later) I now have a rubber band around three hundred forty-one cards."

The medical community largely refuses to help . . . emergency refuses patients who show lesions on their bodies; a doctor refuses to examine a body to determine the cause of death, making the body ineligible for the morgue; the medical community refuses to make research on this topic a priority. There is one doctor in New York whose real name is Dr Linda Laubenstein – she treats numerous HIV/AIDS patients over the years. She collects data, helps with drug trials and observes. One thing she observes is that, contrary to every other doctor she knows, she doesn't put on any protective gear other than gloves when tending to her patients and she never gets sick.

Dr Laubenstein and the other characters in the movie are activists, trying to get a response not only from the medical community but from the government. "We are dying," they say, "and nobody cares."

After 3 years of fighting and struggling and losing people, one of the characters says during a funeral address, no one will help because "they just don't like us." The dominant culture was so hostile to the gay community and the politicians were terrified of becoming associated with a group that was so hated and everyone was terrified of getting close to the disease. The politicians were terrified of getting any of it on them and becoming unclean. I don't know if it's fair to say government officials didn't care if people were dying; they certainly didn't feel the need to address it in a hurry. It wasn't until 1985 that President Regan spoke about HIV/AIDS publically for the first time.

God made us in God's image to be caring, compassionate, loving, and we live in human systems with human rules and human prejudices that keep us from living out God's love. These ways are often invisible to us until someone tells us a parable or helps us to look at something in a different way to turn on the light.

God's standard for love is radical inclusion and radical justice. As we look at the world today, we've made some progress on some issues, created some others, and still have work to do to manifest and expand the kingdom of God.

This scripture illustrates for us the need to not accept the status quo, especially as it relates to human dignity and the well being of creation, but to be curious about it, find those boundaries, and push on them. It calls us to challenge the assumptions that someone isn't worthy of God's love or our love; challenge the assumption that offering love in that place is too difficult or costs too much. God spoke the world into creation and continues to speak to us of love, mercy, reconciliation . . . of a path forward with possibilities, because creation is not done and there is still work to do.