

“Who is my neighbor?”

By Klaudia Smucker

Based on Luke 10:25-37

I was sitting in a pastoral team meeting when our administrative assistant came in and told us that airplanes had hit the World Trade Center. We wondered about what happened, but attempted to finish our meeting. She came in again and told us that another plane had hit the Pentagon, and there was a plane missing that might be headed for the White House. We stopped our meeting with the realization that someone had attacked our country. My first impulse was to gather my family around me, but first we planned a service of grief and lament for that evening. That same evening, sitting in a packed sanctuary, we sang songs of grief, lament, and comfort. We read Psalms of anger and pain and sorrow. We cried together. As people stood up and shared confusion and fears, one woman stood up and said with a smile, “Remember, Jesus said that we must love our enemies.” When she said that, I felt as if someone had punched me in the stomach. It felt too soon to wish our enemies well. It felt like a time to lament and give our anger, fear, and confusion to God, and not to gloss over our feelings too quickly. This was the time to name them and give them to God. I said, “Yes, that is where we want to get to, but not all of us can move there at the same pace. Right now, some of us feel like the Psalmist in 139 who said, “Oh that you would kill the wicked, O God, and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me.”

The woman who said that we should love our enemies was right. Jesus did say that. Matthew 5:44-45, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons and daughters of your Father in heaven.

God causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get?” Her timing for saying that was questionable. Our country took a dark turn toward war, first invading Afghanistan with bombs and bullets, then assaulting Iraq with shock and awe that looked not like war on our televisions, but like a video game with fireworks. Some of us then were more ready to ask the question, “What does it mean to follow Jesus when someone has hurt us badly?” As a country, we became suspicious of all things Muslim. I marveled at how easily attitudes generalized into “us” against “them.” I heard stories of businesses, owned by people who wore turbans and prayer shawls, that were trashed and burned.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan is one of the most recognized and beloved parables by Christians and non-Christians alike. If someone asked you to describe the essence of what it means to be Christian, you could point to this parable as an example. It would be easy to slip into sentimentality as we remember the times we might have stopped and helped someone on the side of the road with a flat tire, or took the time to be kind to a stranger when we were in a hurry to get somewhere. Those are good things to do. But the parable of the Good Samaritan is more radical than a random act of kindness. It is about eternal life. Jesus tells the parable all because of a question from a lawyer, testing Jesus. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus said, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” The lawyer answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus said, “That’s right. Do this, and you will live.” But wanting to justify himself, the lawyer asked, “And who is my neighbor?” The lawyer, who was an expert in the law, probably lived

as behavioral proof for faithful obedience, and he quotes the law perfectly. But when he quotes it, to love God with heart, mind, soul, and strength, and his neighbor as he loves himself, he can only obey that law if he knows how to define neighbor. “Funny you should ask,” said Jesus. “I have a story for you.” And he tells him the story of a man who was severely beaten when he attempted to take a trip from Jerusalem to Jericho.

The man who traveled down the hill from the winding road toward Jericho was indeed taking his life in his hands. Some might even say that he was being risky, because everyone knew it wasn't safe to travel it alone. There were all sorts of cracks and crevices, curves, and hills for bandits to hide behind. We don't know why he traveled it, but we do know what happened. He was beaten up and left for dead at the side of the road. Every inch he tried to move brought pain. The blood caked in his swollen eye, and what was left of his clothes barely covered his body. He looked like road kill. When the priest saw him, he crossed to the other side and kept on walking. The same thing happened when the Levite, the man who assisted the priest in the temple, came down that road. But when the Samaritan came and saw the man, he was moved with pity. He went to him, bandaged his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them, gently lifted him across his donkey, took him to an inn, paid the innkeeper, and promised to come back. “Which of these three people was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” Jesus asked.

The radical nature of this parable is difficult to convey, because we don't feel any animosity to a Samaritan. For those of us who have heard the story since we were little, we think of the Samaritan as a good person. If someone called me a good Samaritan, I'd take that as a compliment. Here is another way to think about this text. If you were lying on the side of the road, bleeding and in pain,

who is the person you would least want to touch you, or to say helped you? Who would you be most repulsed by? And who is that person or group of people who might rather die than to touch you? That is the kind of person that a Samaritan was to a Jew in the 1st centuries.

Samaritans believed a different creed. They worshipped in a different place. They had a different Bible, and they interpreted scripture differently. In the Jewish world, there was no such thing as a good Samaritan. For the lawyer who wanted eternal life, he would never expect God to require such a repulsive, mind-bending leap when it came to loving another human being. This would require digging down into reserves that did not yet exist. How could Jesus suggest such a thing? How could the purity boundaries be broken any further? Amy-Jill Levine, a Jewish professor at Vanderbilt University, said that for her, the person in this story would be equivalent to a member of Hamas coming to help her. For us, it might be a Muslim, a member of Al-Qaeda, or a person with AIDS.

As human beings, we are used to adjusting the gospel to our own level of comfort. It's one reason why there are so many denominations. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, and in answering the question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?," Jesus pushes us to levels of discomfort that require us to let go of some things, and to love in ways we never thought possible. He asks us to turn from our own self-preoccupation and preferences toward the other in ways that stretch us beyond understanding. Can we show kindness and love mercy for a person who repulses us, a person we don't like, a person whose personality clashes with ours and makes us angry? Can we do that for a person who believes differently? This deep concern for others is the heart of the whole gospel. It is also hard news to hear, because it requires the sacrifice of picking up our cross

and following in Jesus' footsteps, showing love, mercy, and kindness to people who are not like us and people we don't like.

Not long ago, I felt pressured into giving a donation for a worthy cause. I grumbled a bit, but gave the money anyway. Sometimes this happens with our time as well. We don't really feel like doing it, but we know it will help someone, so we do it anyway. Those kinds of things do require some sacrifice, but they don't hurt too badly, and we usually bounce back pretty quickly. We pat ourselves on the back and move on. But to show kindness to someone who we don't really want to be around, to someone who might be our enemy, takes the sacrifice of hospitality to a different level.

A pastor friend of mine had been wronged by a churchgoing business man in the community. She had worked things out with him, but wisely kept her distance, and took care of her business needs elsewhere. This worked until one day when she was helping another pastor with an anointing service, and noticed this man was in the congregation. As people were coming forward to be anointed they would go to whichever pastor was available. Suddenly she looked up, and there was that man standing in front of her. For a split second, she hesitated, but forced herself to look into his eyes like she had looked into every other person's eyes. As she anointed his forehead, looking into his eyes, she said, "I anoint you for healing of body, mind, and soul in the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. May God forgive your sins, and grant you wholeness and peace." She said that as she said those words, she realized that she had been holding onto resentment that had gotten lodged in the corner of her heart. Every person deserves the hospitality of God's love and mercy, even the man whom she suddenly realized she had made her enemy.

What might we be holding onto that keeps us from reaching out in love? What requires acting on something that is the opposite of what we would naturally do? Who is hard to be nice to, let alone try to love? As we put one foot forward and do what we know is right, but not natural, we have made a step toward transformation. One day, my daughter came home from Kindergarten and said, “I heard the S word in school today. It is so bad that I can’t say it.” We asked her to spell it, and she said, “S-T-P-D.” Jesus asked the lawyer, “Which of these three do you think, was the neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” I can picture the man standing there, trying to say the S word, but he couldn’t do it. There was no getting around it. His eyes were opened, even if his heart wasn’t there yet. He said, “The one who was neighborly was the one who showed mercy,” and the door to transformation cracked open. Hopefully his vision began to clear at least a little bit as the love of Jesus shed light on it all. This is what Jesus came to do; to show us that we can do justice, love kindness, show mercy, and walk humbly with our God. He didn’t hold back for the Roman centurion, the 12 year old girl, the Syro-Phoenician woman, or the ostracized tax collector. Not long before he told this story, he was refused entry to a Samaritan village, and his disciples encouraged him to rain down fire on that place. He refused. The good news of the gospel, and the hard news of it, is that in Jesus’ encounters with others, he included radical hospitality to people who weren’t like him at all.

I told a friend that I was going to a small church with a very diverse congregation. He said, “Uh Oh.” I said, “What do you mean, uh oh? Diversity is a good thing.” He said, “Yes. But people don’t like diversity, they like homogeneity. And there is often a push for one group to think like the other.” When we can do that radical thing that seems impossible, that thing that the world

tells us can't be done, and love the one who has different opinions and theology, or the one we have decided is our enemy, as Jesus asked us to do, when we look into the eyes of that person, our vision will include the cross. This is part and parcel of what salvation means. This will save our lives. When we show respect and kindness to all who are made in the image of God, we are carrying out the message of Jesus. When Jesus said, "Love your enemies," did he really mean the Roman soldiers who had the power to crucify him? Did he mean the Pharisees and Sadducees who wanted to find a way to kill him? Did he mean Judas who betrayed him?

"Beloved, let us love one another. For love is of God and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Those who do not love do not know God for God is love." These words from I John 4: 7-8 remind us that to love God is to love neighbor is to love God. This is the beginning of eternal life, and it has everything to do with the state of our hearts. It is something that we can't do on our own. We can only do it through Christ who strengthens us, and with the honesty of a loving community around us.

In India, people use the word "Namaste" to greet each other. This word means "The divine in me honors the divine in you." This is a reminder that each person we encounter is created by God, and carries the image of God within them. As God's children, we bless and nourish each other when we recognize people not just as Arabs or Hindus or Muslims, or Lutherans or Catholics, but as beloved children of God.

It is a hard thing that Jesus asks us to do. And sometimes we will need the help of the Psalmist as we go through times of anger, lament and grief as we journey toward love.

On this September 11, as a church, as a people who proclaim the good news of Christ, we remember together that Jesus said, “Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you.” Oh Jesus, you have asked for a hard thing. And you died for it, for us, for them. Give us the courage to do what you have asked.