

## "No, seriously - *who* is my neighbour...?!"



One day a colleague and a friend of mine was driving along the highway somewhere in Alberta. Her car broke down and she pulled over to the side of the road. She was out of cell phone reach, so she decided to wait and to flag down a passing car and ask the driver to call the auto club. Now you should know that my friend looks like she couldn't hurt a fly; she is a tiny lady, and makes you think of your favourite Sunday School teacher (and yes, she happens to have taught Sunday School).

After a long time a well-dressed middle aged couple in a really nice car pulled over to the side of the road. She gave them a quarter and asked them to call the CAA. She waited a long time, but no tow truck arrived.

**("The Good Samaritan" by Vincent van Gogh)**

By and by a beat-up car pulls over with a grubby looking character in tattered jeans who reeked of alcohol; she talks to him through the almost closed window of her car. She gives him a quarter and the number for CAA.

Time passes and then a set of yellow flashing lights signal that the CAA tow truck has arrived. He secures her car to the hitch and they head for the garage. They get to chat, and the driver says, "Ma'am, I almost didn't come. They guy who called in was drunk and I was sure it was a prank, but he kept insisting that this old lady needed help. I decided to come just in case. I wouldn't want my grandmother stranded on the side of the road.

He didn't know anything about another phone call. The nice middle aged couple in the fancy car had not called; the one my friend said was the least trustworthy was the one who had carried through on his promise.

(You may remember that last week I gave everyone a pop quiz. This week it's Jesus who is given the pop quiz; except that he turns the question around and presses the lawyer into answering his own query.)

We need to be careful about motives here. We are told that the lawyer was trying to justify himself in front of the crowd. It means he wanted Jesus to tell him what he already thought he knew. He wanted Jesus to tell him that he was already doing

what was necessary to inherit eternal life. You can tell he already knew the answers to the questions he was asking.

Yet the answer to his question, "Who is my neighbour" was not expected. The story of the guy who got mugged and left for dead went pretty much as everyone expected. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was notoriously dangerous. It was steep and hilly and a perfect place for robbers, but it was the only way to get to Jericho, so many people found it necessary to travel it. It was so steep and dangerous that it was also known as the Valley of the Shadow of Death, the same Valley of the Shadow of Death that the 23rd Psalm talks about.

When both the priest and the Levite did not stop, everyone in the audience, including the lawyer, would have been assuming that the 'good guy' would be an ordinary Israelite. All of those stories went like that! The people would have been saying, "All right, Jesus! Take that lawyer down a peg or two. Show him that we ordinary folks are just as good as he is."

But Jesus is not trying to trick this lawyer or to put him down; he's trying to show him and all the others who are listening in to this conversation the way of God's kingdom. His story destroys everyone's preconceived notions about who our neighbours are. To really understand this story you have to know a little bit about Samaritans. They were Jewish people who had intermarried with local non-Israelites many generations before, and over the years they developed theological ideas and rituals that were different from the Jewish people. And they hated each other with a vengeance. To give you a more contemporary idea, it would be something like telling this story in a Roman Catholic community in Northern Ireland and having the good guy turn out to be a member of the notorious Protestant Orange Lodge.

The lawyer's question is ours: What is the measure of a good and faithful life? Amos used the plumb line, to show how God's law was like the straight line needed by a carpenter, it's your point of reference that always applies, it's universal. And in this passage from Luke, Jesus explains the so-called 'great commandment' with this parable, also showing that God's law always applies, it's universal, with no exceptions.

The first thing we need to be aware of is that Jesus really didn't answer the lawyer's question. He didn't say, "I'm telling you, Samaritans are our neighbours!" The story said, in part, "this Samaritan was a neighbour." The seemingly obvious ending of the story is, "go and do likewise. Let us stop worrying about who we are to love and who not, who is in and who is out - just go and show love."

One of the problems with this parable is that it is so familiar we run the risk of not really hearing it anymore. If we don't listen carefully, it's just a nice story about a man who helped a guy who was hurt. The fact is, Jesus didn't tell parables as cute stories in order to be nice; Jesus used parables to show that God's kingdom is often the exact opposite of what we expect or how we think things ought be. Jesus uses parables to turn our world upside-down.

The lawyer begins by asking the question "who is my neighbour", seeking to find out how far he had to go to be accepted by God's. He wants to be told that the neighbours he has to love like he loves himself are all the Jews from all the tribes - but that he doesn't have to care for non-Jews. In fact, that was what everyone believed in those days, but he wanted Jesus to draw the line somewhere, or if he made any exceptions. So you can imagine how shocked everyone must have been to hear Jesus draw a big wide circle that includes *everyone* - no exceptions, no if or buts.

Do we come to the Bible and to our faith looking for minimum requirements? Do we come looking for loopholes, so we're off the hook and don't have to change our lives too much, like that lawyer?

At its core, the Christian faith has always called people to a broader vision; to embrace *everyone* as a child of God, not just the people who think and talk just like we think and talk. In receiving God's unconditional love we are changed and transformed so that we can love others in the same way. Ideally, non-Christians should recognize us by our radical caring and sharing, by random acts of kindness that may seem pointless in the eyes of the world, but are meaningful to God and to us. God's grace at work.

Do we seek minimum requirements? Do we want a mere pass on our exam, or do we strive for the best we can offer? Because it's not a simple test to determine who are in and who are out; it's a life of commitment. The lawyer who came to Jesus was looking for minimums; but Jesus tried to make him see God's bigger dream. Jesus wasn't telling him he was wrong, he just tried making him see he was missing out on so much more.

In order for our lives to be good and meaningful and a blessing; in order to build outposts of God's Kingdom we must live our lives with the plan that God sets for us. And by doing that we find God, and God finds us. And suddenly, what seemed an unrealistic dream and a pie in the sky becomes a reality: by loving God with all of our being we are now able to love our neighbour as we love ourselves and make God's kingdom come closer.

This parable challenges us to think about our own life and our own faith and the choices we make often without thinking about them. It challenges our views of who can minister in Christ's name and who can give and receive ministry. Because this parable shows that God works through outsiders, people we have always discounted. It turns around our expectations.

This story is not a test. And it won't give you any hard and fast rules, either. This story is a gentle invitation to come and experience the fullness of life in God's kingdom. To come and accept God's love, even when it comes through someone we despise and don't trust. To come and love your neighbour as yourself. And, in Jesus' words, to "go, and do the same." Amen.