

Inconvenient Care

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Luke 10:25-37

A rabbi and a lawyer go into a synagogue. That's not the opening line of a joke; it's a loose translation of the opening line of our passage. Luke doesn't actually say it happened in a synagogue but he hints at it when he says the "expert in the law" "stood up to test Jesus." It sounds like it happened when Jesus was teaching, possibly in a synagogue. If it did, the lawyer wasn't there to worship.

The "expert in the law" was not a civil or criminal attorney in the modern sense but an expert in the Hebrew Scriptures, especially the Torah which by Jewish tradition contained 613 commandments, 365 negative and 248 positive. With his expertise he felt qualified to challenge Jesus, or even to get him into a debate that might expose him as a country bumpkin, or even a false teacher and showcase his own superior knowledge and skill.

His question was "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" It was (and is) a good question and he wasn't the only one who asked it. In a legalistic religious context that question is always on people's minds: What must I do to get eternal life as my rightful inheritance? In other words, how can I earn it?

Jesus doesn't answer the question directly but instead turns the man back to his own field of expertise: "What is written in the law; how do you read it?" The conversation has probably already taken a turn the lawyer hadn't planned on. Instead of testing Jesus, Jesus was testing him. But he gives a good answer: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul with all your strength and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

It is significant that the man puts the two great commandments on a single plane. It was common in that day to elevate the first and denigrate the second. As one scholar put it, "Divorce of religion from morality was a cardinal vice of the righteousness of the time." Jesus commends the man, "You have answered correctly; do this and you will live." But now the lawyer is on the defensive.

Did you notice that he does not quibble about loving God? Maybe he feels he can pretty well tick all the boxes under that one. After all, he is "an expert in the law." Keeping commandments is his specialty. And maybe he even thinks loving God is not so hard. What's not to love about the Creator who lavishes your life with good things? Besides, God is invisible. Not so the pesky neighbor who lets his kids run through your flower beds and offers his political opinions as if they are gospel.

But his question is more fundamental: "Who is my neighbor?" Once again, he's pretty sure he ticks all the boxes here as well. "Neighbor" is kin; neighbor is the person who looks like him, worships like he does and shares his convictions. There are definite "neighbor" boundaries. He asks the question not because he wants to know something new but because he wants to bolster his boundaries. Luke says he asked it "to justify himself." Jesus answers with a story, a story with magnets, two that were sure to pull the lawyer in and one with a kind of reverse polarity that will repel him but in the end convict him.

"A man, just "a man," race or religion unknown, was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho..." a dangerous road where violent thieves could easily hide in the rocky caves that lined it. The man was attacked, beaten, robbed, and left half dead alongside the road.

Along comes a priest. The priest sees the man but makes a wide berth, wide enough to lose sight of him: out of sight, out of mind, and out of luck for the poor fellow in the ditch. The priest is a busy man; his work at the Temple is demanding. Maybe he's heading home after a long day in the Temple. Maybe he's working on a sermon on the love of God. Surely he can't be expected to stop and help a stranger who may be a gentile or even a hated half-breed! Off he goes.

Then a Levite comes along. He too does important work in the Temple. Both of these men were temple officials. They represent the church of that day. He too sees the man in the ditch and moves to the other side of the road where the wounded man is less obtrusive. It just would not be smart for him to interrupt his day by tending to this man who may or may not be worthy of it. So off he goes as well, leaving the half dead man to be fully dead in a short time.

The priest and the Levite are magnets that draw the lawyer into the story because these two men were his neighbors: the same race, the same religion, the same social status. It is as if he is in the story. While the man in the ditch may or may not be a neighbor, the heartless response of the priest and Levite is troubling. Chances are he's thinking by now, why did I think testing Jesus was a good idea?

Jesus goes on: "But a Samaritan..." Oh no, not a Samaritan; please don't put a Samaritan in this story, especially not when you begin the sentence, "But a Samaritan..." "But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him." "Pity," weren't there some laws about that? Yes, there were, but did they really extend to strangers? The Samaritan "went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'"

"Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers? The expert in the law replied, 'The Samaritan.'" No he didn't! He couldn't bring himself to say the word but he did have to confess, perhaps to his shame, "The one who showed mercy on him." Jesus said, "Go and do likewise." Luke doesn't tell us what effect that conversation had on the lawyer but I think it's safe to say he didn't soon forget it. And maybe, just maybe, as he reflected on it and was convicted by it in time he returned, not to test Jesus but to trust him, even to follow him.

I did not choose this passage for this occasion, Chad did. He said he thought it has important things to say about pastoral care. And he was right. The parable speaks to each one of us personally and it speaks to the church about pastoral care.

The first thing it says is that pastoral care is not peripheral or optional for the church; it is central. The priest and Levite were deeply involved in worship but the fact that they could walk past a man in desperate need said they elevated worship of God at the expense of caring for people. Pastoral care is living out the second great commandment, without which worship is incomplete. In his first epistle the Apostle John puts it boldly: "If anyone says, 'I love God' yet hates his neighbor, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen" (I John 4:20). Imagine coming to church here for worship, and the worship is inspiring, the sermon is scintillating, the music is elevating, the liturgy flows like a lovely stream, but no one is prayed for, no needs are mentioned, no names are lifted up. The church is called "the body of Christ," but a church without caring is a body without a heart. Almost every week there's a note or two in our bulletin thanking the membership for prayers, cards, meals and words of encouragement. We don't need a stethoscope to hear the heartbeat of the church.

A second thing this passage says to us is pastoral care keeps its eyes on the side of the road. Both the priest and the Levite moved to other side so the wounded man would be out of their vision. Jesus says when the Samaritan saw the man he "took pity on him." It would be easy for a church the size of LaGrave to lose sight of people who are alongside the road for one reason or another. When I came to LaGrave there was a small room off the office complex that we used for our coffee breaks. On one wall of that room there was a sheet of poster paper with the names of our shut-in members written in long-hand. You simply could not escape seeing those names when you sat there with your cup of coffee. The names were there as a reminder to Rev. Eppinga and me to visit those folks, usually at least once a month. They were on the margins of church life but like the Samaritan in Jesus' story pastoral care has eyes for those on the side of the road.

A third thing the story says to us is pastoral care follows through. Think about the Samaritan: He went to the wounded man; he touched him; he put a healing mixture of oil and wine on his wounds and he bandaged them. Then he put the man on his donkey and took him to an inn; he stayed with him during the night and when he left the next day he not only paid for the man's care he promised more money as needed when he returned. Part of his plan was follow up. If we're going to care about people in Jesus' name it can't be hit and miss or "one and done." There has to be follow through. That happens here with programs like Caring through Sharing (the meals program), the Comfort and Care Team (for those who are grieving), Pastoral Care Assistants who call on home-bound members, and other ministries under the Pastoral Care Committee, including a new one called "Recovery and Respite." And of course the work of Kristy Manion as Minister of Pastoral Care and Chad as Minister of Visitation and Formation.

One thing that stands out about the Samaritan in Jesus' story is his willingness to be inconvenienced. Whatever he had planned for that day went out the window when he stopped to attend to the wounded man. The

priest and Levite bowed to the idol of convenience under the guise of piety; the Samaritan put his plans aside, prompted by his pity. In her book *The Broken Way* Ann Voskamp reflects on what she calls “inconvenient care.” She writes, “A willingness to be inconvenienced is the ultimate proof of love...You love as much as you are willing to be inconvenienced...The best investment of your life is to love exactly when it’s most inconvenient.”

Think about how much of Jesus’ ministry consisted of interruptions. He’s on his way to the home of a man whose daughter is deathly ill when he’s interrupted by a woman with persistent bleeding who touches the hem of his robe. He stops to recognize her faith and speaks a blessing. One day some parents bring their little children to have him lay his hands on them. Whatever else he had in mind for that day was put on hold for that “interruption.” It could be a leper or a blind man or a Roman centurion whose servant was sick. Interruptions were opportunities for ministry.

The Samaritan in Jesus’ story was a model of inconvenient care, and so is Jesus. How convenient was the incarnation? How convenient was the cross? Isn’t that why we have all these crosses in this sanctuary, to remind us of the terribly, wonderfully inconvenient love of God for people like us who are no less needy than that man alongside the Jericho Road? And don’t these same crosses call us to love each other like he did? On the night before he was crucified Jesus did not remind his disciples to love God above all. Maybe that went without saying. But what he did say was this: “a new commandment I give you, that you love one another as I have loved you.” In other words, “Go and do likewise.”

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