

## Doing Love

Luke 10:25-37

A Sermon by Allen Mothershed / St. Matthew UCC / September 15, 2019

This past summer, Marla had a friend from High School who came to visit with us when we were at Glacier National Park in Montana. Just so happens, we were in luck. He is a fly fishing guide and brought along his riverboat so he could take us fishing. He took Luke and me out on the first day. I watched as he showed me how to pull out a long amount of florescent fly fish line. He then told me to flip my wrist up to 11 o'clock and then to about 2 o'clock and bring the line forward. It was thrilling to watch that line whip behind me before it came forward in a beautiful loop rolling out on to the water. I was so pleased on the first cast that I was able to get all that line behind me, bring it forward, and somehow not hook myself in the face in the process. That was my fear. I'd had myself hooked in the face with a fish hook when I was an older child, and it left a scar that lasted for about 20 years.

My instructor was a most patient teacher. He did not damage my ego as he found ways to tell me my fly fishing skills were less than professional. For one thing, I was allowing the rod to drop way too far behind me, more like 5 o'clock than 2 o'clock. It is the same thing I do in golf when I swing the club way too far back. Then I had a bad habit of forgetting to check my line so that the line is drifting down the river behind the fly. He told me I was scaring the fish away by pulling the fly off the water right where the fish is most likely to be. The few times I managed to get a bite, I attempted to set the hook hard. He said, "we are not fishing for Florida marlin out on the deep ocean."

Luke was doing far better. He settled into a beautiful cast, laid the line down just in the right place and remembered to check the line. He was patient as he let the fly float over where there might be a fish. Even though it was a day when the fish were playing hard to get, he managed to bring in two fish. Kira did even better the next day. On her first cast, she landed a beautiful rainbow trout and then managed to pull four more before the day was over. I was enjoying figuring out how to cast, but they understood that the goal was to catch fish.

This lesson from my fly fishing experience has something to teach us about living our faith. There is a difference between learning about our faith and using faith for a useful purpose. I relish those time when I study or hear a sermon that changes my perspective. I feel close to God when I spend times reflecting on the things of God. But as wonderful reflection and knowledge are, it only matters if it leads to changing the way I live.

The early Christian monastic understood that true faith transformation involves the whole self. What begins as a new insight must find its path into our heart. From the heart, it must transform how we speak. From our words, it must transform what I do in my life. When the whole self transforms, faith has power.

One way to illustrate this is to think about the attitude of the heart we call compassion. Compassion is one of the essential attitudes of the heart for all the great faiths in our world. Compassion happens when we perceive with our mind the pain and challenge of another human being. We then feel that pain in our heart. But if it stops at that point, compassion becomes sentimental and superficial. It becomes only pity. Many of us live our faith only at this level. For it to be true compassion, it must compel us to take action.

I am sure you have had this experience like I have. You are driving along and see a person whose car has broken down on the side of the road. I see some poor soul out there in the rain trying to fix their car as trucks zoom by at 80 miles an hour. There comes this moment when I feel bad for that person. I feel sorry that they are in such a bad situation. I find myself thinking, "I sure hope they have a cell phone and have called a friend or a wrecker to help them out." There are times when I am praying for them as they are waving for help.

My father-in-law is different. He is not a fancy theologian but a doer of good deeds. I know that there are times when he has pulled his car over to help. He gets out in the rain and brings over his toolbox and fixes the problem. I imagine for the one who has received that sort of help from my father-in-law that it feels more like love than my feeling sorry for them or praying for them as I drive on.

If we turn to our scripture, the best illustration of this is the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke's gospel. I doubt I need to spend much time reminding you of this favorite parable of Jesus. The Samaritan is the one no one in their right mind would ever place the word "good" in front of. He is the one that people in Jesus' original audience would have most enjoyed being the brunt of a good joke. The story of the Good Samaritan might have actually sounded to Jesus' original audience like a joke, at least initially. You know how religious jokes often start with "There was a Protestant minister, a Catholic priest, and a Jewish rabbi...."? That is the way this story begins. We know that the last guy will be the punch line.

So everyone laughed when Jesus tells them the priest did not stop to help. Pompous hypocrites. They laughed harder when the pretentious lay person gets some distance and moves on. Then they waited eagerly for third person and the punch line. Jesus saves the best for the last. He says, "and then a Samaritan came along." Some listeners are already chuckling in anticipation. "Oh, great, the Samaritan. Boy, he is going to get it!"

But it was not a joke Jesus was telling. Unless you want to say the joke was on them. Jesus was luring them in so he could transform the way they think and live. This Samaritan does not wear the black hat that everyone expected. The story ends not with him only feeling bad for the person left half-dead, but with the Samaritan taking care of the man. He does this with great care and sacrifice. His heart, mind, and actions are in sync. He has compassion with his whole self invested.

This is as good of a story as they come. But what we often miss is that there is a prelude to this story and a postlude which involved another character, a religious teacher. This is a smart man who is on a quest for better moral understanding. He wants clarity in his faith. He begins by asking Jesus the question that most of us also have, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Don't you want to know the answer to that question? What must I do to get the Willy Wonka Golden Ticket that will grant me admission at the gates of paradise? Who wants to knock on death's door and discover it's too late? You left your ticket at home and will not be admitted. The only problem with this way of thinking is that Jesus seems to have understood that eternal life was not just about the reward at the end of life. Eternal life is a sweetness of life that starts now.

In good rabbinic fashion, Jesus answers his question by giving him a question, "Well, I bet you given this some thought. How would you answer your question?" Jesus let the man shine in the spotlight. The man answers, giving Jesus exactly the answer that Jesus would have given. He says that you must love God with your whole self and love the neighbor as you would love yourself."

It could have ended there, but the man wants more clarity. The man ask Jesus, "But, who is my neighbor?" In other words, "Who are the people I am expected to be a loving neighbor towards?" This is just another way of asking "Who do I not need to worry about loving?" Help me have some reasonable limits and boundaries.

This is a sensible question. This is a question we also ask. How do we draw the limits of who we are responsible for? "Charity begins at home," we like to say. "Why don't we take care of the people who are in our own community, rather than worry about people we do not know far overseas?" Then we also might think, "I want to help people who deserve my help. I do not want to help those who would do me harm."

There is another game we play. Barbara Brown Taylor points out how we can complicate things so much, get lost in our own lack of clarity that we never quite get around to doing much of anything (Taylor, "Do Love," A Preaching Life). We can get so lost in our arguments and our indecisiveness that we put off acting altogether.

Marla and I find ourselves back and forth about a lot of things that deserve our support. One of those issues is the environment and global warming. These days one of the people left half-dead on the side of the road is in reality the creation itself. We debate about what is our obligation and what are the limits of our obligation. Do we change all the light bulb in our house to LED's? When we were thinking of the thickness of the siding in our house, do we go with the more energy efficient siding or something more cost effective? Our central air conditioner is on its last leg. Do we replace it now to get rid of the awful CFO's and buy one that is more energy efficient? Do we buy an electric car next time around? But, wait a second. Marla's job is flying on airlines that dump more pollution on one trip than a single person does in a year. The problems seem so big and insurmountable. Are we just wasting our time?

You can become locked into that sort of questioning for so long that you don't do anything. I suspect that is what the lawyer was doing. I am sure it is what both of the religious leaders were doing as they had to decide what they were going to do about the man in the side of the ditch. It is not what the Samaritan did. What he did was listen to the feeling he had, dropped any other concerns, and made a sacrifice for the sake of a man who is his enemy. He did not confuse himself with too many thought. He only listened to the compassion in his heart and acted upon it.

Jesus never answers the lawyers question about "Who is my neighbor?" In fact, He tells a story not about who I need to be a neighbor to, but about an enemy who acts as a neighbor to me. If I understand His point, Jesus is telling us that if an enemy can act as a neighbor, then we can no longer place limits on who we need to be a neighbor to. The truth is our enemies are also fellow human beings. We are all in this world together. We share common humanity and vulnerabilities. In the end, all our divisions and boundary-making amount to nothing. We are in this world together and there can be no limits placed on love.

Yes, it is true, every need is not a call. We cannot respond to every request for our help. But what we can learn, like the Samaritan, is to listen to the compassion God has given us. We can allow that compassion to control the whole of ourselves so that our thoughts and feelings are reflected in our words and actions.

The parable ends and Jesus asks the lawyer, "Now who was the neighbor to the man left half-dead on the side of the road?" The lawyer said, "The one who showed him mercy." Then Jesus said, "Then go and DO likewise. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and all your strength, and with all your mind." Amen.