

## Love That Doesn't Look Away

Dr. C. Cavanagh – July 13<sup>th</sup> 2025  
Wall Street United Church

**Scripture:** The Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37, New English Translation)

There is perhaps no parable in the Christian tradition more beloved or better known than the Parable of the Good Samaritan. On the surface, it seems simple. We teach it to children: Help those in need. Be kind. Show compassion. The message feels so obvious, so familiar, and it's so important that we often fail to notice what else is going on.

Because this parable is not just a heartwarming tale about being nice. It's a call to action that is as disruptive today as it was two thousand years ago. It's about compassion, yes — but compassion that's deeply tied to justice. Compassion that is inconvenient, that costs something, that crosses boundaries—and demands we tear down the unjust systems that leave people bleeding by the roadside in the first place.

To truly grasp what Jesus is saying, we need to take a closer look — not just at the story, but at where Jesus is, what's happening around him, who is there, and why he tells this parable in the first place.

So let's start with where Jesus is. Jesus tells this story while he is on the road to Jerusalem. He has left Galilee, his home region in the North, and is heading toward the holy city. As he travels, Jesus and his disciples rely on the hospitality of others for food, shelter, and welcome. That was the norm for travelers in that culture. Hospitality was woven into the fabric of Jewish life, going all the way back to the story of Abraham and Sarah who welcomed three strangers into their tent—strangers who turned out to be messengers of God. The idea was simple: when you welcome the stranger, you just might be welcoming God.

But there's tension in the air. Just prior to this parable, if you recall from last week, Jesus and his disciples had been turned away by a Samaritan village. Now, Jews and Samaritans were deeply divided against each other in those days, so this shouldn't have been too much of a surprise. They weren't that different though. They shared much of the same scripture and moral code, including the law of hospitality. They worshiped the same God, and they were related. But they were sworn enemies. Their divide was theological: the question of where sacrifices should be made to God. Samaritans believed it was on Mount Gerizim, and Jews believed it was the Temple in Jerusalem. And they were irreconcilable.

Even though this rejection shouldn't have come as a surprise, Jesus' disciples are furious about it. It's almost like they're ready to be angry at those darn Samaritans. Have you ever experienced that, where there's someone who gets on your nerves and you're just ready to be angry at them? But Jesus has refused to be drawn into this, and instead he continues to try to teach his disciples about compassion and hospitality and dignity.

And so the stage is set for today's reading.

What I'd like to do today is look at the different characters that appear in today's passage, and the roles they play. As we meander through the story this morning, I invite you to consider: where is God in this story, and where are you? The people we're going to meet are the Expert in the Law, the bandits, the traveler, the Priest and Levite, the Samaritan, and of course Jesus.

The first person we meet is the expert in the law. An 'Expert in the Law' means an expert in the Law of Moses, or first five books of the bible. We don't know anything else about him other than that he wants to 'test' Jesus.

"Teacher," he says, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

And boy, is that the wrong question! Just as Jesus is trying to teach about interdependence and compassion, and how we all belong together, this guy asks: "So, how do I get my salvation, my personal reward just for me?" He misses the point entirely. But so do a lot of us, right? I had the good fortune to attend Reverend Donald Wachenschwanz's workshop on theology this past Monday. He explained that really there is one major thing that divides Christianity. It's the question of whether one is focused on getting into heaven, or whether one is focused on creating heaven on earth.

And that division in terms of understanding what faith was about — either to get into heaven or create heaven on earth — was there two thousand years ago. On the one hand you have the 'Expert in the Law' who is concerned about getting into heaven, and probably thinks that this is achieved by following a lot of rules about what people who want to go to heaven can wear or eat, what they should sacrifice, and who they can love. That's known as the *Priestly Tradition*, which served a purpose in breaking things down for people and unifying them. But they could get lost in a 'legalese' that missed the big purpose.

But Jesus, quite clearly, called on his disciples to follow the *Prophetic Tradition*, which called on believers to clothe the naked, feed the hungry, and set the captives free. That's what his whole first sermon was about. He preached the kingdom of God as something near, something now, something we participate in building and something for everyone. Remember what Jesus talks about in the prayer he gives us, the Our Father? "Thy kingdom *come*, thy will be done, *on earth* as it is in heaven." Jesus asks us to create the kingdom here and now.

So Jesus throws the question back at this ‘Expert in the Law’: “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” And it turns out the man does know the greatest commandment: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind—and love your neighbor as yourself.”

Jesus says, “You have answered correctly. *Do this, and you will live.*”

Notice—he doesn’t say, “Do this, and you’ll have eternal life.” That’s up to God. He says, “Do this, and you will *live*.” Richly. Right now. Here. Today. That’s what Jesus is offering: not just a ticket to the afterlife, but a way to live fully, justly, compassionately, here and now.

Well the Expert is now a little embarrassed perhaps by how easily Jesus turned the conversation around, so he asks another question—“And who is my neighbor?” But the question doesn’t feel innocent. It’s almost like he wants a limit, a nice convenient little rule about who is in and who is out. He wants to know who he’s *not* obligated to love.

- So let me pause for a moment and ask you where you see yourself and where is God for you when you hear about the Expert?
- In response to the question, Jesus does what he so often does. He doesn’t answer directly. He tells a story. And that story, that parable, is set in a very particular place.

Let me tell you about it and a little bit about the BANDITS, who are our next characters.

Today there are two ways to get from Jerusalem to Jericho. I learned this when I visited the region in 2012. You could take the modern highway across the barren and excruciatingly hot and dry Judean desert. It’s a particularly stark part of the desert with no oases along the way as it drops down quite a bit from Jerusalem to Jericho about 25 km away, which is at the level of the Dead Sea, which by the way is the lowest point on earth. (For you trivia buffs.)

The other option would be the ancient way where you could go on foot or with a donkey from Jerusalem to Jericho through a meandering and spectacularly beautiful gorge called the Wadi Qelt. A small stream runs through the center of the gorge and there are narrow walking paths on both sides. It could be a bit challenging, but you would have water all along the way and shade so it was by far the preferred route.

That’s the way our man from Jerusalem would have gone in the parable, but it came with risks. Big risks. And all of Jesus’ listeners would have known that too, because the walls of the gorge are pockmarked by thousands of caves.

Today there are monasteries built into the caves, but in Jesus’ time those caves were instead filled with people who for all intents and purposes were economic refugees, who had turned to banditry to survive. Under Roman rule, taxes were collected through a corrupt chain of

middlemen. Each level took an additional illegal cut. By the time the taxes reached the average person, they were crushing. And it wasn't just the Romans who drained the people. The Religious Leaders or priests and Levites in Jerusalem (who also by the way were political leaders) demanded their temple tax as well as sacrificial offerings. The meat from those sacrifices went first to the Priests.

People lost their homes, their olive groves, their livelihoods as a result. Many ended up in the thousands of caves that mark the walls of the Wadi Qelt on the road to Jericho. These people had water and shelter thanks to the gorge, but everything else they could only get by robbing those who passed by. They even took the clothes of the travelers.

That's not to excuse the bandits. They made a choice to abandon God's law to love their neighbour, justifying themselves by their desperate circumstances. It's still wrong. Perhaps Jesus wanted to demonstrate how terrible a place the world can be when we abandon compassion for self-preservation. This is not the Kingdom of God that he calls on us to build.

- Before we leave the bandits, let's pause again: Where do you see God and where do you see yourself when you hear about the bandits?

Because of the bandits, our traveler, a Jewish man from Jerusalem, has his plans interrupted and his life turned upside down when he is attacked and left for dead. Let's talk about him for a minute. Because Jesus' listeners are Jewish, *he's* the one they would identify with.

Maybe you've experienced a moment like that when there's a diagnosis, or someone dies suddenly, or something else happens and your life is upended. It's a moment of extreme vulnerability where we sometimes feel exposed and maybe even strangely ashamed because we're used to being able to take care of ourselves.

We're not *not* contributing to the world at moments like that though. When we are suffering or alone, our gift to others is our vulnerability. When we move others to compassion, we move them closer to God. Jews call the gift of being able to help others a blessing or a 'Mitzvah'. So if you are suffering right now and feel you need help, that is still a gift that you offer. Where do you see God and where do you see yourself when you hear about him?

And now let's move from the injured man to the PASSERSBY who interestingly, often get most of the attention when this parable is examined. As we heard, first a priest passes by, then a Levite—another religious leader— does the same. And neither stops, although it's clear they see the man. In fact, the text goes to the trouble of saying they "*Pass by on the other side.*" To "pass by on the other side" on such a narrow path meant making a deliberate, physical effort to avoid getting close. You literally had to crawl down and across a stream and go up the other side. It wasn't passive neglect — it was active avoidance.

Now their actions prompt us to ask ourselves if we too sometimes look away from the suffering going on around us and in the world. Do we too often think that the plans and things going on in our life are more important than the suffering of others? These are good questions to meditate on. But there's more going on here.

Because Jesus isn't just pointing out the failings of two random men who passed by and refused to help. He's doing that for sure, but he named these two men as Priest and Levite for a reason. It's a parable after all. They don't represent the whole religion, but they do represent those in the religious ruling class. He's saying you teach compassion, but you don't live it. In fact, you go out of your way to avoid it. He is courageously calling out the religious leaders of his day because in his day they also had social and political power.

It's kind of like today when sometimes politicians will say all the right things about caring about people, but then cut the programs that are needed to support them. Jesus is getting political. (I can't imagine why they crucified him!). This is important because it's often easier to remember the story Jesus tells, than that Jesus tells the story, at personal risk. Where do you see God and where do you see yourself when you hear about the Priest and Levite?

Well, the priest and the Levite pass by. There were essentially three kinds of Jews in Jesus' days — Priests, Levites and Israelites — so at this point, everyone is expecting an Israelite to come along next.

But, plot twist!! A SAMARITAN comes down the road.

To the Jewish listeners, this would have been shockingly unexpected. Especially for Jesus' followers who are still fuming that the Samaritan village turned them away. At the best of times Samaritans were considered heretics and outsiders! But in Jesus' story, it is *this man* who stops. Who sees. Who feels compassion. This compassion drives the Samaritan to ignore both the costs and the risks. He picks up the wounded man, takes him to an inn, clothes him, anoints him as one would anoint a king, covers every cost, and promises to return to him. He goes way beyond the so-called rules of hospitality.

Because Jesus is showing what God's hospitality is like. It's so much more than we can imagine. When we are wounded and suffering and alone, God will always hold us, anoint us and love us. And God calls us to do the same for each other. God isn't always the person passing by, as in the story of Abraham. Sometimes God is the one offering hospitality, through another person perhaps, maybe one we don't like, and we need to be ready to accept it. Accept that you are loved. You/we don't need to earn salvation. That's a given. We can focus instead on loving our neighbour in the here and now, as God does.

Another interesting thing is — we don't know how the Samaritan's village treated him when he went home once they found out what he did. Remember, Samaritans despised Jews as much as Jews despised Samaritans. Most likely they would have looked down on him. It cost him. Where do you see God and where do you see yourself when you hear about him?

When the parable ends, Jesus turns back to his questioner: "Which of these three was a neighbor?"

The Expert in the Law simply replies, "The one who showed him mercy." I love that the Expert seems to get it in the end. It means there's hope for all of us.

And Jesus says, "Go and do likewise."

Notice he says "*do*". What a beautiful and simple call to action. It's not enough to believe in love. Jesus is calling us to embody it. *To live it*. To be the kind of neighbor who refuses to pass by.

This story we heard today from Luke is still, two thousand years after it is written, an epic tour de force. It's a strident call for compassion, inclusion, and justice. Jesus calls out the unjust system of his day, while also calling on his listeners to act with compassion towards all their neighbours. All of them.

The story lets us learn something from each of the characters:

From the Expert, we learn not to focus selfishly on our own salvation.

From the bandits, we learn not to drag others down just because we're suffering.

From the Priest and Levite, we learn not to look away.

From the Traveler, we learn to let ourselves be loved.

From the Samaritan — we learn to love across differences and live with compassion no matter the risks.

And from Jesus we learn to pull down the barriers that separate us and call out systems of injustice. We forget sometimes that it cost Jesus to tell these stories of radical acceptance and change. This parable is an instruction manual on how to live. It's about how to build a world that reflects the heart of God—a world of radical compassion, courageous justice, and boundless hospitality. Jesus wants us to follow the example of the Good Samaritan. But Jesus *also* wants us to follow him, Jesus. To call out the unjust systems in our day. To not be silent when we witness oppression, no matter what it costs us, because Jesus was not silent.

The Good Samaritan doesn't just heal a man. He shows us what the Kingdom of God looks like. A kingdom where enemies become friends, where strangers become neighbors, and where love crosses every line and refuses to look away. Amen