

Open Door Policy

Luke 10:25-37

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In our call to worship this morning, we read Revelation 7:9-12:

After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice:

“Salvation belongs to our God,
who sits on the throne,
and to the Lamb.”

All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying:

“Amen!

Praise and glory
and wisdom and thanks and honor
and power and strength
be to our God for ever and ever.
Amen!”

These amazing words paint a picture of what the kingdom of God will look like in it's fullness. An entire nation of nations. No one who is supposed to be there is missing. Everyone is together, not paying attention to language, family, or ethnicity.

All worshiping God.

Just last week, I went to a city council meeting to hear the debate on putting a Recovery home for women in a community in Lethbridge. One statement stood out to me:

“Why are you working so hard to put vulnerable women into a community that doesn't want them? Let me be very clear. We are not welcoming them. We do not want them. We will not welcome them.”

I can't imagine a statement that is further from the amazing, welcoming acceptance that John paints in Revelation.

How in the world will we get from where we are today to that picture of radical, loving acceptance of each other?

When I was a kid, my parents used to frustrate me to the point that I thought there was no recovery. We were beyond the pale. I had a ritual that I would follow with leaden steps and a heavy heart. I would trudge downstairs and grab a suitcase that I would proceed to drag up the stairs. It wasn't the full sized one — they were bigger than I was. It was the carryon size.

Thump. Thump Thump.

My mom, of course, knew what I was up to. She would not even acknowledge me as I passed her, head hanging, up to my room to pack up my earthly belongings.

I would stuff the suitcase with clothes, stuffies and a blankie. I would add in a good measure of determination, and all of the moral outrage that a five-year-old could muster. Then I would head downstairs to bid her my final farewell. I was about to become independent. I was ready to move out on my own, so that I could do whatever I was being so unjustly denied — usually involving a sugary snack, a later bedtime, or more tv.

She would invariably offer me lunch.

The way to a man's heart is through his stomach.

She knew that it would slow me down and give us a chance to talk.

In hindsight, it always amazed me the wisdom that mom showed in these moments of little boy crisis. She never once told my to stop being a foolish kid, to have perspective, to stop being so dramatic. Instead, she told me that I was always welcome in her home, at her table, in her fridge, in her life. No matter what I did, she loved me, and I was her kid, no matter if I wanted it or even acted like it. Heaven knows, I gave her enough reasons to question her loving acceptance of me. . .

The Parable of the Good Samaritan.

There are a lot of reasons for God not to extend his love to humanity. There was the rejection at the Garden of Eden. Then humanity filled creation with evil, violence and oppression, which ended in the flood. Rejection after rejection, costly re-engagements, only to be rejected again. In fact, I did a word search for rejection, and my fancy software came back with 103 hits. We have a nasty habit of rejecting God, and when that isn't enough, we reject each other. Very, very few of these are about God rejecting things, and then only in response to repeated rejection himself.

The world that Jesus came into was very black and white. Clean and unclean.

The rules of clean: do not taste, do not touch, do not handle (Colossians 2:21-23). Do not eat with certain people. When someone clean touches someone unclean, then they become infected.

Jesus tells a parable that flips this whole idea on its head. The story that Jesus tells is specifically designed to push people's buttons, and upset them.

For once we don't have to look too far to understand one of the key ideas in this parable, because it happened again just last month. The hate between the Israelites and the Samaritans has been percolating for a few thousand years — today, we call it the Israel-Palestine conflict. And they are still fighting over the same piece of land — the West Bank. Most sane people avoid the West Bank today, and that is precisely what this traveler did as well, taking the longer route from Jerusalem to Jericho.

Alas, this road doesn't prove much better, and the man is beaten, stripped, and robbed. Then Jesus flips the narrative: a Samaritan acting like the people of God are supposed to act, in sharp contrast to the people of God. That the hated, despised Samaritan turns out to be the hero of Jesus' story, the example of God's radical, loving acceptance, would be the talk of the town for a month! And it wouldn't be kind talk, either.

This parable doesn't really fit very well into our own time and place either! Too many things are missing from the Samaritan's approach.

There is no call to relationship.

There is no preaching the four spiritual laws and the Roman's Road to repentance and salvation.

There is no expectation of repayment, profit, or relationship.

There is no hesitation over whether the cost is worth paying.

There is only love.

This open-door policy of God's scared the church of Jesus' day. The whole idea of clean and unclean are being put away. There is the expectation that those who are sick are to be cared for, those who are poor are to be fed and clothed, those who are outside the community are to be welcomed in.

Even the prostitutes (Rahab). The adulterers (David, the adulterous woman). The murderers (David, the man on the cross). The religious snobs (the Pharisee at midnight). The contagious (the Leper's).

It is likely that there are some of you in here this morning who need to hear that message. God loves you. He loved you before you came to church. He loved you before you felt sorry, sad or guilty about anything. He loved you even when you were in the middle of whatever it is that you think makes you unlovable.

In fact, there is nothing that can be done to escape God's love.

We are told that while we were still sinners, Christ died for the ungodly (Romans 5:8).

Can you wrap your head around that? He died for those that rejected him utterly and completely. He hung on the cross for the injured Israelite, the Samaritan, the priest and the Levite. He hung on the cross for the Pharisees who conspired to kill him, for the Roman soldiers who put nails through his arms. He hung on the cross for the ISIS soldiers killing his followers. He hung on the cross for the crusaders slaughtering Muslim innocents in Jerusalem. Even while he does not approve, condone, or sanction the things we do and the choices we make, Jesus hangs on a cross so that we have options.

God loves you. Get used to it. He loves you, regardless of whether you want him to or not, whether you recognize it or not, whether you are going to accept it or not. His loving acceptance is immutable, unchangeable, unassailable, unstoppable. It is this kind of love that my mother was showing me in all of my stubborn childishness.

Here is an adaptation of the story of the Good Samaritan, taken from a scene that is all too common in Lethbridge right now. Remember — the point of this story is not to make us feel good about ourselves, and justified. Rather, it is intended to hold up a mirror to our own beliefs, attitudes, and actions, to motivate us to loving acceptance. If you are uncomfortable, then at least I find myself in good company!

A young man sits on the sidewalk, slumped against the wall. He is disheveled, smelly, and obviously incapacitated. He has a bag with empty pop cans spilling out of the top tucked in beside him. There is a used needle on the sidewalk by his arm.

A local parent, on her way to a townhall meeting regarding the safe consumption site in Lethbridge approaches, and sees the young man. She looks around, up and down the street, and feeling her aloneness, crosses the street and hurries by. It is exactly this fear and this reason that she needs to make her voice heard regarding this safe consumption site. She is tired of being afraid to walk down the streets in her own city. She is tired of worrying that her kids might pick up that guy's needle.

The owner of the business against whose wall the young man is slumped comes out of the door, intending to lock up for the day. Setting the alarm and double checking the lock are automatic to him. He looks down the wall, and sees the problem. He is frustrated, because this is the third time this week that he has seen this particular man, though it is the first time he's been unconscious. Rather than call Arches to come and help, or an ambulance, he decides to phone the police. After all, he reasons, this is the only way to make the city understand his ongoing problem. Even as he calls, he knows that it could be hours before they are able to respond, so he decides to head home. They will deal with it, eventually.

A young immigrant woman walks up the street on her way to catch the bus to her English as a second language group. She sees the man, and crosses the street to get a better look. Immediately, she gets out her cell phone and calls 911, requesting an ambulance to come and take care of him. As she waits on the phone, she settles down on the sidewalk beside him, and calls out for help. Her cries attract the attention of the parent and the businessman, as they hurry away to their appointments. Oh good, they both think. Someone is dealing with the issue.

Maybe I am the only one that this story makes uncomfortable. Who was the neighbour to the man on the street? Who loved him? Who accepted his humanity, rather than seeing a threat or a problem? The question that Jesus forces us to be confronted by is not who is the unclean man on the street — that is obvious. He is one of God's kids. The question we have to answer is, "Who am I?"

I am fascinated that the same question still haunts us today. I want to justify myself, and so I see myself asking, "How many of these people am I responsible for? What if it costs me in my business? In my family? In my time?"

Most of the time, these questions really come down to the same thing. Where is the bar? I don't want to do more than is needed, but I don't want to fall short either! So, what is the minimum that I have to do to get into heaven?

The answer to that is everything! Rather than trying to get across the finish line, life in Jesus is actually an invitation to cross the starting line, and get involved in the race!

This is what I mean. Scripture says that Jesus died for the ungodly. Even more than that, he came into the world while we were still sinners. In other words, Jesus serves, heals, cares, and loves, while we are still

Killing each other.

Cheating on our spouses, our taxes, our businesses.

Making purchases that encourage child labour, environmental damage, or harmful chemical exposure for the labourers.

Turning refugees away.

Addicted. To Fentanyl. To wealth. To productivity. To porn.

In fact, Jesus lovingly accepts us before we think about repenting, or even looking to be saved.

Here is our blessing, and our challenge. We are accepted by Almighty God, before we even know what God wants from us, let alone whether we obey him. His love signals the start of the race. We are invited to run with him, in life.

We began with a list of the verses in scripture that show the human capacity for rejecting God and each other. Here is God's response.

Our challenge is that it looks wildly different to what we think it should look like. Our question winds up being the same as that of the lawyer. How do I love my neighbour? How does the parable of the Good Samaritan line up with my opinions and beliefs about something like the Safe Consumption Site, and our work with addicts? How does it shape our votes and support of policies put forward by our politicians? How does it show up in how I spend my time, money, and influence?

So often, we look to our own first. God please protect my family, my kids, my friends. And then when we have the opportunity to do the same thing, we walk past a person and see their addiction, their need, their irresponsibility, rather than see them as someone with a name, as someone's kid, as someone created in the image of God, no different from me than circumstances have caused.

There is a company called the Happy Givers. They have a coffee mug that sums things up rather nicely. It says:

Love your neighbour.
Your homeless neighbour
Your Muslim neighbour
Your black neighbour
Your gay neighbour
Your immigrant neighbour
Your Christian neighbour
Your Jewish neighbour
Your atheist neighbour
Your addicted neighbour

We are loved and accepted by God through Jesus Christ.

Now, go and do the same, in Jesus' name.