

January 10, 2021
Now go and do the same ...
Luke 10:25-37

An ad for a t-shirt showed up on my Facebook account. The slogan? *"I'm not arguing, I'm explaining why I'm right."* It's an apt comment on our times. Fewer people, I find, are interested in honest discussion than they are in trying to explain why they're right and I'm wrong. Alan Alda once said, *"listening is a willingness to let the other person change you."* Do we actually want to listen? Or are our minds already made up? This is nothing new ...

A Jewish lawyer comes up to Jesus. He knows he is right. He is trying to try to trick Jesus: *"Teacher, what must I do to receive eternal life?"* He KNOWS his answer. He is not honestly asking Jesus for his opinion. He wants to smack Jesus down. Jesus – wisely – avoids a confrontation. He answers the question with a question, *"What do the Scriptures say?"*

The man, perturbed, shoots back: *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and with all your mind; and love your neighbour as yourself."* Jesus replies, *"You're right; do this and you will live."* And Jesus turns to walk away.

The lawyer is annoyed. There is a good crowd on hand to watch – his friends are there, the common people knew him as a legal expert who had the equivalent of a Harvard education. And He hasn't been able to blast Jesus. So we read, that in order to justify himself, he calls out after Jesus, *"That's all very well, Teacher, but who is my neighbour?"*

Jesus stops. He turns and looks closely at the man. The crowd goes very silent, waiting for the fireworks to begin. What would happen next? The question was an important one, then, and now. For that lawyer, as for all Jews standing there, the answer was simple: the Jews were God's chosen people; so their neighbour was their "Jewish" neighbour. But they were surrounded by and infiltrated by non-Jews. There were the Romans. There were Samaritans (half-breeds – half Jewish, half non-Jews). Jews were to have no dealings with any foreigners, Romans or Samaritans. Jesus has been socializing with all kinds of different people, including non-Jews. Would He say the right thing?

They knew they had to love God and to love their neighbour – their Jewish neighbour, right?

Today, we know we need to love God. We know (I hope) that God desires that we love our neighbour. But who is our neighbour? Our neighbour who is just like us, right? What about our First Nations neighbour? Our Moslem neighbour? Our different-lifestyle neighbour?

"Who is my neighbour?" It's one of the most important ethical questions of all time. If my neighbour is only close acquaintances, fine. If people just like me, OK. If people in my neighbourhood, that's more difficult. If people not like me – no, not that. Right?

As the crowd hush to hear the argument that might ensue, Jesus calmly sits down and begins to speak. He doesn't argue. He doesn't explain why He's right. He tells a story ...

Jesus introduces us to five people

First, we have a victim. An innocent, Jewish man going about his business. He could be any of Jesus' listeners. He could be you or I. Jesus could have made the case that he wasn't too bright walking a dangerous road alone, but that's not the point ...

Second, we have the thieves. These marauders brutally beat and rob an innocent traveller. Perhaps they felt they were justified. Maybe their children were hungry. Jesus shows little interest in these robbers; he assumes we can figure out we shouldn't be like these gangsters.

Third, we have two people we can lump together, a priest and a Levite. Both are part of the religious establishment. Like the lawyer questioning Jesus, both know their Old Testaments, and are very familiar with the critical question, "Who is my neighbour?" If anyone should know the answer to such a question it should be these guys. Their answer is clear: not this guy. Neither the priest nor the Levite stops to help him. Jesus offers no insight into what is going on in their minds. He leaves it up to us to find the excuses for them. Are they frightened? Do they simply not care? Are they busy getting on with their work? Do they feel they have nothing to offer? They don't know the man; is it simply not their problem? What do you think? Why didn't either stop? Jesus forces us to fill in the blanks. We must step into their shoes and ask; would I pass by? Why? Why not?

Fourth, we have the innkeeper. He does help the injured traveller because he is asked to and is paid for it. But he does take a bit of a risk; he trusts the Samaritan's promise to return.

Finally, we have the Samaritan. This is a surprise. Samaritans were despised outsiders. Nobodies. No Jew would EVER help a Samaritan; the legal expert knows a Samaritan is not a neighbour to a Jew. In a shocking twist, however, this Samaritan helps a Jew ...

Jesus carefully understates the extent of the Samaritan's efforts. His help is significant but not overwhelming. He offers basic, common sense first aid; he delays his journey long enough to help; he exposes himself to possible attack from the same bandits; and he incurs some financial obligation. But the Samaritan is not Superman. He does not do orthopaedic surgery on the roadside. He does not take the victim back to his home and nurse him back to health. He does not obligate himself to support the victim for the rest of his life.

As Jesus tells the story, the Samaritan feels "compassion"; the Greek word actually means he felt "spleeny" – he was deeply moved inside; he felt sorry for him in his guts. Then he does ordinary, common sense things. Expecting no reward. Just doing the right thing.

What does this story mean?

Jesus gives us the key. While the lawyer was concerned with "*Who **IS** my neighbour?*" – he wants to know what people he is responsible for (or more importantly, who he is NOT responsible for) – Jesus asks him back, "*Who do you think **WAS** the neighbour to the man who fell among thieves?*" or "*Who **proved to be** the neighbour to the man ...*"

The good Jewish lawyer is off balance. He cannot bring himself to admit the awkward truth the outcast Samaritan behaves more neighbourly than the Jewish priest or Levite. He grumbles, "*The 'one' who showed mercy.*" Jesus says, "*Yes, now go and do the same.*"

Jesus' point? Neighbourliness is not a group of people we get to draw a neat circle around, excluding all others. Instead, neighbourliness is a way of acting toward anyone, everyone. It's a way of going about day-to-day life with a neighbourly eye; it's a way of being in work, school, or condo building or lodge and seeing those in need; it is a way of being church and seeing those who struggle; it is a way of seeing the world and living your life. It's a matter of just doing the right thing – ordinary, common sense things – expecting no reward.

We can be neighbourly as we simply walk through our lives. John, in I John 4 says, "*Dear friends, let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God. Anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God. But anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love. God showed how much he loved us by sending his one and only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. Dear friends, since God loved us that much, we surely ought to love each other.*"

If we love God, we love one another – whoever the other is. We are not thugs who rob and destroy. Few of us here, I hope, have a problem with robbery. But it is possible to steal more than material possessions; do we ever steal someone's good name by spreading gossip, feeling animosity towards them, or treating them poorly? Do we ever steal people's joy and peace through posting or reposting nasty social media comments?

Jesus also speaks against the subtle attitude of avoidance. The religious men did nothing wrong, but they did nothing right either; simply being "not a bad person" is not enough; Jesus invites us to be "good people"; there's a difference between being "not bad" and "good." An old adage says, "*All it takes for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing.*"

Jesus wants us to hear is that each of us can make a difference in our world. No matter who we are, we can make the world better for one person. We may be quite ordinary. It doesn't matter. We don't have to be Superman or Wonder Woman. God has given each of us gifts, skills, resources, abilities, experiences we can use in ordinary, common sense ways.

Individual lives – communities – the world – are changed when ordinary people do ordinary, neighbourly things. Our acts don't have to be big. All the Samaritan has going for him is a few minutes, a donkey, a small amount of cash, and a big heart; that's just enough to make all the difference in the world to one poor man ... We don't have to be anyone special; we just have to use our neighbour eyes, our neighbour common sense, and act neighbourly.

For us, this story was dramatically illustrated when I had my first episode of vertigo in rural Italy. Our "landlords" at the cottage we had rented for a week – and their friends – went over the top to get two ordinary Canadians home visits from three doctors, including an ear-nose-throat specialist. They didn't need to do anything for us. But they did what they could do – ordinary, common sense things – and that made all the difference to us. They showed us mercy. That was all. That was enough. "*Now go and do the same,*" says Jesus.

The unwritten ending ...

Imagine an epilogue to the story. A few days later, we're back at the inn. By now the man who was beaten is well again. He has notified his friends from Jerusalem, who have come down to celebrate his rescue and recovery with him. They're having a party. At dinner he stands to make a few remarks in which he tells the amazing account of his harrowing trip and its moments of sheer terror. He tells of the hours, lying in the ditch, waiting for help. He recalls how two a priest and a Levite passed by without even stopping. Finally, he tells about the Samaritan who befriended him in the nick of time.

Imagine various travellers arriving at the inn during the festivities. Two religious leaders, heading up to their priestly duties in Jerusalem, are startled to see a boisterous crowd of city people, the who's who of Jerusalem. They step into the banquet room, after all, they should be welcome in such a crowd. Then there is the moment their eyes meet those of the speaker at the head table. Imagine the emotions of that moment; what are their emotions? There's nothing they can say or do now. Their chance is lost once and for all, and now all that's left is nagging, profound regret. For whatever reasons these religious men missed their moment – those reasons now seem petty and meaningless. They had their chance; they muffed it.

Imagine another moment, when three highwaymen enter the inn, one wearing a gold ring he seized in the heist. The guests quickly recognize it as belonging to their friend. What is going to be their response? Perhaps fortunately, Jesus doesn't tell us about these visits.

Jesus only tells us about a Samaritan who told an innkeeper that he would stop by on his way back through and pay the tab for an injured man he'd brought in one night. Imagine an outsider, a foreigner, a nobody, quietly enters the door of the inn, goes to the desk, and humbly asks the innkeeper, *"Do you remember me? I stopped here a few days ago and brought in a stranger whom I found in pretty bad shape. How is he? What do I owe you?"*

The innkeeper smiles but doesn't answer; instead, he sends a boy into the next room. There is a sudden cascade of sound, and so many cheers ... the door of the banquet hall bursts open. The ordinary, outcast Samaritan who no Jewish lawyer would consider a neighbour, looks into the face of the man he'd met in a ditch a few days before.

This is joy. This is life. This is neighbourliness. And this is the difference that takes place when Jesus' love flows through one person toward another – whoever they are. It simply doesn't matter who the other person is. When Jesus calls us to love our neighbour, He is really calling us to joy. To purpose. To fulfilment.

Maybe we need to spend a less time explaining why we're right. Jesus is asking us, *"Who proved to be a neighbour to the man who fell among thieves?"* You know the answer: *"The one who shows mercy."* Listen to Jesus, *"Yes, now go and do the same."* Are we listening? Will we let Him change us?