

Appearances Can Be Deceiving

Jesus has an interesting way of telling stories. He often uses parables, which are defined as "simple stories that teach a moral lesson." In the reading from today, a lawyer approaches Jesus to ask a question. The lawyer we read about is not a lawyer as we would know them today. In fact, the lawyer may have been a witness who was searching for a specific answer.

Regardless, the lawyer asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. And true to form, Jesus says "What is written in the law? What do you read there?' And the lawyer answers, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself."

This is sound advice indeed. Love your neighbour as yourself. We are emerging from 2 ½ years of separation, both physical and emotional separation. There are still some folks who don't feel comfortable going out and are able to join us online for worship. I got on an airplane for the first time in a long time and was overwhelmed with anxiety and fear. Now, granted, a lot of that had to do with the circumstances under which I was flying.

I do find myself fearing the stranger. I wear my mask most everywhere I go. I was shocked in Calgary airport to see so many people walking through the airport not wearing a mask. Same in Toronto airport. And there was me, with two silicone zip top bags, one for used masks and one for clean ones. As soon as I entered the airport, I put a mask on. When we landed and I was in a new airport, I used the washroom and changed my mask.

Was it necessary? I don't know. Did it make me feel better? Absolutely.

When we were children we were taught of "stranger danger". The rules at schools are quite strident now. I could not go and pick up my nephews from school unless I was on an approved list to do so. And if it was my first time picking them up, they would have to identify me before I was allowed to take them.

We have a history, as a society, of being weary of strangers. Jesus, pointedly, does not use the term stranger. Rather he uses neighbour. Instantly, we think of our physical neighbours, the ones we may or may not know other than to smile and wave when passing them.

The lawyer, seeking clarification, asks Jesus, "And who is my neighbour?" Jesus then tells the parable of the stranger...of the neighbour. The story, interestingly, is not told from the perspective of the injured man, but rather of the person who looked after him, who was a Samaritan. The parable is colloquially known as The Good Samaritan.

At first blush this is the story of one stranger helping another. A lovely story of a man stepping up to help a fellow traveler on a notoriously dangerous stretch of road. Two men walk by without a second glance, then this kindly stranger steps up and saves the day. A lovely, heartwarming tale.

Except that's a gross overgeneralisation of who these characters were and why the parable seems to be so sweet.

The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was a frightening road best traversed with someone and never at night. This man is assumed to be Jewish, which would be an appropriate assumption. He is traveling alone and is attacked by a band of robbers. They beat him, stripped him and left him for dead. Thankfully, he is not dead.

The first person to come upon the injured man is a priest. He crosses the road and does not check to see if the man is alive or dead. At the time priests were strictly forbidden from interfering with a dead body and as this was a notorious road, he likely thought the man was already dead and continued on his way. He did not believe this to be his problem.

The next person to come upon the injured man is a Levite. Levites are assumed to be descendants of Levi, son of Jacob and Leah. Traditionally they looked after subordinate worship tasks, assisting priests. As such this Levite man may have felt the same way as the priest, that he must not interfere with a(n assumed) dead body. And so he crosses the road and did not check on the injured man.

The Samaritan comes upon the injured man and is filled with pity. He cleaned the wounds with wine, poured oil on them to help them heal and covered him with bandages. Next, he puts the injured man on his own animal and takes him to an inn where he cares for the man through the night.

The next day he gives the innkeeper two days wages to keep the man at the inn and care for him. And promises that on his way back through Jericho he will settle up any debt that may be incurred after the denarii is used up.

Jesus then asks who was the neighbour to the man who was injured? And of course, the lawyer responds, "the one who showed him mercy."

This is all lovely except for the understanding of the Samaritan. Somehow the word Samaritan has been sanitised to mean someone who does something kind for a stranger. At a superficial level this is correct. But to truly understand the incredible gift the Samaritan man gave to the Jewish man we need to understand more about Samaritans.

There is a long, storied and violent history between Jews and Samaritans. To say they disliked one another would be an understatement. And the people hearing this story, the Jews, would understand that mightily. An untouchable and righteous man, such as a priest, walks by the injured man, as does the Levite. Did they walk by because of Levitical laws of the day, surrounding blood and touching the dead or because the one who was injured was not considered a nice man?

Considering the history between Samaritans and Jews it is astonishing that the Samaritan man even stopped, let alone to tend to and care for the Jewish man. AND he took him to safety as it is certain he would have met death had he stayed on that road. AND he made sure the man stayed in the safety of the inn where the innkeeper had been paid to care for him until he was well enough to return home, or the Samaritan returned to care for him and settle any remaining debt.

A denarii in those times was a great sum of money. At the very least it was considered a day's wages. That the Samaritan leaves two denarii was quite generous. He truly cares for this stranger, this neighbour, this Jewish man and wishes that he receives kindness and care until he is well enough to go home.

Let's try retelling this story from a more contemporary slant.

What if the man who is left for dead is an anti-vaxxer?

What if the man who is left for dead is a proponent of the Freedom March?

What if the man who is left for dead is a neo-Nazi?

What if the man who is left for dead is a sex worker?

What if the man who is left for dead is a criminal?

Just for a moment, put yourself in the shoes of the injured man.

You are close to death and have noticed two people who you thought would help you have chosen to cross the road and not venture near you.

You don't have the strength left to cry out, or even to moan.

Your biggest enemy comes upon you and while you're expecting the worst, they tend your wounds, lift you into their car and take you to the nearest hospital.

And because we live in Canada in the twenty-first century and enjoy universal healthcare, we don't need to worry about direct payment for services.

Now, put yourself in the shoes of the Samaritan.

You are going about your day and come across your worst enemy close to death.

What do you do?

Do you walk by and leave him for someone else?

Is it the classic, not my problem?

Or do you have mercy on them and treat them as best you can, then put them in your car and take them to the nearest hospital?

Appearances can be deceiving. And while we may live in a time when we are weary of the stranger, perhaps if we reframe the word stranger to mean neighbour, it may not feel as frightening or overwhelming.

A friend of mine is married to a very scary looking man. He has tattoos over most of his body. Wears his hair in a ponytail and has a very long beard. Most of the time he looks like he is in desperate need of a shower and shave. They have two children together and when their daughter was tiny she would ask her daddy to play tea party with her. And he did. Every single time. I dropped by to visit once on a sweltering summer day. There he was, on the front lawn, dressed in black, biker boots on his feet. He had just returned home from work, riding his motorcycle and his daughter greeted him outside.

She wanted to play Princess Tea Party on the front lawn. And so they did. He even had his pinky out drinking pretend tea from tiny china cups and saucers. AND he was wearing a shiny child-size tiara. The scene was comical and he was very serious in playing joyfully with his daughter. And truthfully, given the size and appearance of this man, I doubt anyone would have had anything negative to say.

You would think this man would have no time for kids. In fact, the opposite is true. He attends all his kids' school performances, he coaches junior soccer, and shows up for them. The fact that he's terrifying to look at makes it all the more wonderful. He is not what you would expect, at first glance. And he quite likes it that way. It also means that nobody will mess with his family.

The Samaritan was a member of a hated sect in Jesus' time. There was no love lost between the Jews and the Samaritans. And yet this particular Samaritan decided that it was better to care for this neighbour than ignore his enemy.

That we should also be so wise to look beyond appearances and historical arguments.

Remember the commandment the lawyer told us, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself."

Whether it be the neighbour who lives down the street from you and always drives over your garbage cans, or the neighbour who lives around the globe, we are commanded to love one another.

And as difficult as this may seem, we are also entreated by Jesus to “go and do likewise.” Loving is hard. Caring is difficult, and yet it’s what we are called to do as followers of Jesus. “Go and do likewise.”

Amen.

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