

Deuteronomy 30:9-14  
Colossians 1:1-14  
Luke 10:25-37

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Pentecost 5C  
July 14, 2019

In the familiar Good Samaritan story, there are two bad examples of uncaring persons unwilling to help someone in need. There is also a good example of compassion, doing the kind of thing for others which pleases God. Bottom line, we're supposed be nice. Well, this description is a bit shallow. Doing nice things for friends or your family is good, but it doesn't really exemplify the parable Jesus tells.

A Good Samaritan is the individual who goes out of his or her way to help a stranger in need, a person who is not a friend but is really in need of a friend who cares enough to show support and share some resources to get through a time of crisis.

Our society honors Good Samaritans with an occasional article in the paper. We've established Good Samaritan clubs, Good Samaritan hospitals, and written Good Samaritan laws to protect well-meaning citizens from lawsuits when things don't work out too well.

To be truthful, the problems of other people's lives can greatly complicate and inconvenience our own lives. We're not always sure what to do, and usually there are other pressing commitments for us which get in the way. The people who need the most help are the hardest to help. If there is a quick-fix solution we can offer, I think most of us would gladly respond to do what we can.

Maybe you are the kind of person who would give the shirt off your back to someone in need. I remember doing a funeral for the Richter family, who told me how Dean's brother, Bill, noticed a stranger shivering in Chicago's winter weather. Bill said: "You look cold, man." "I am," came the reply. Without another word, Bill took off his own coat and gave it to the man to wear. He felt pretty good about it, until a few blocks away, he realized he had left his keys in the coat pocket. Bill had to search the streets to find the guy to retrieve what he hadn't meant to give. Sometimes it seems: "There's no good deed which goes unpunished."

Law-enforcement officials remind us how we need to be street-wise when encountering strangers who seem to be in crises. They advise you not to make eye-contact with panhandlers, nor to stop when you see a car with its hood up and somebody tries to flag you down. It's possible you could become the victim of robbers and wind up half-dead on the side of the road. We're advised to call the authorities to respond to the situations we observe.

I suppose they're right. Yet, the Good Samaritan parable stills gnaws on our consciences, making us wonder what is the right thing to do. Don't you wish the Bible said: "Call 911!" Scripture warns us to be wise as serpents and yet as innocent as a dove. There will be times we try to be Good Samaritans, but will wind up feeling foolish and guilty, instead of wise and innocent. Experience teaches us to observe the results in giving people what they ask for. If we keep bailing somebody out of the same mess over and over, are we really helping? Are we teaching co-dependence, treating the symptoms without addressing the underlying problem? We start to second-guess ourselves, suffering the paralysis of analysis, thereby doing nothing.

Michael Peterson shared this memory in “Chicken Soup for the Country Soul.” Michael had been asked to appear on a television talk show in Toronto, Ontario in the winter of 1990. At the end of the first day of taping, he was on his way back to his hotel room, when he saw a man sleeping on the sidewalk in four inches of snow with only a cardboard blanket to shield him from the freezing cold. What really broke Peterson’s heart was when he realized the man wore no shoes or socks. As the traffic light turned green, it seemed life was prompting him to move along. Back in the hotel, Michael promptly forgot about the man on the street.

Several days later, prior to the morning taping, Michael was having coffee in the green room at the station. All of the “important” people had left the room. Michael saw the janitor go quietly about his business every day while he was there. The man never said a word except “Good morning” or “Can I get anything for you, sir?” He always had a smile to give to everyone. When Michael asked the janitor how he was feeling today, the humble man told him how he rode his bike to work in the snow, and was feeling rather sorry for himself . . . until he saw a man sleeping down on the corner with just a piece of cardboard for covering from the cold and no shoes. Michael Peterson almost choked on his Danish as he heard this simple janitor describe how he felt such compassion for this homeless man that he went to a store and bought the man a pair of socks and shoes.

As Michael listened to the janitor, he saw in his mind a poster which hung in a friend’s bedroom when he was a teenager. It was a picture of a child handing someone a flower. The caption read: “The smallest deed always exceeds the grandest of intentions.” Michael said he stood there wishing he had been the one who bought the shoes and socks for the man. Later, he concluded an interview with a social worker from Ontario, who told him a story about Mother Teresa. When asked how she had accomplished such great things in her life, she responded: “None of us can do anything great on our own, but we can all do a small thing with great love.”

When Michael went back to the hotel from the studio, he looked for the man on the street, but the homeless guy was nowhere to be seen. Michael decided he would be ready for the next person in need.

People learn compassion through their wounds, particularly when Christ reveals His presence through small kindnesses of compassionate people. Compassion means the ability to identify with someone’s pain, suffering with the victim. Compassion always finds a way to show mercy, as a wounded healer. I have the feeling this might have been the Samaritan’s story, forever changing his heart!

Compassion is a heart condition you’ll recognize by its external symptoms. Jesus said: “Go and do likewise!”

Amen.