

“Our Moral Compass: Community”

Luke 10: 25-37

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Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. ‘Teacher,’ he said, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ Jesus said to him, ‘What is written in the law? What do you read there?’ The lawyer answered, ‘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 neighbor as yourself.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.’

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’ Jesus replied, ‘A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, “Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.” Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?’ The lawyer said, ‘The one who showed him mercy.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise.’

I confess this morning that it is a bit intimidating to preach on a text like, “The Good Samaritan,” when it is so familiar to us. What more can be said about this story that we all know so well? Although, it seems not everyone is on the same page. On “The Tonight Show with Jay Leno,” Jay often conducts interviews on the street with random people – asking them questions about current events, politics and even religion. The joke, of course, is that people do not know the answers to questions that we at home think are ridiculously

easy. Recently, Jay asked a man, “What can you tell me about the Good Samaritan?” “Uhh, I think he was someone that did a good deed.” “That’s right,” Jay said, “Do you know anything else about the Good Samaritan?” Long pause...so Jay prompts, “Was the Good Samaritan a character in the Bible?” “No, that’s not it,” the man quickly replies. “Anything else you can add?” Jay repeats. “Oh yeah, they named a hospital after him!”

So, whether we think the story well or not, lets all begin with a little background that might be helpful. If you are participating in one our small group Bible studies, you were reminded this past week that the Jews and Samaritans did not associate with one another. You may remember from our study last year of the 50 stories from the Bible that we can’t live without – that after the kingdom of Israel divided in two, the northern kingdom was the first to fall. It was overrun by the Assyrians around 721 BC – and the Assyrians promptly re-populated the nation with non-Jews. The resulting mix of people – the Samaritans – was always held in suspicion by the southern kingdom. Moreover, Samaritans didn’t worship at the Temple in Jerusalem. Instead, they worshiped at a number of traditional altars like Bethel and Gilgal – the so-called “high places” warned against by the prophets. Therefore, the Jews would not have considered the Samaritans “neighbors” to whom they owed allegiance or compassion and I suspect the feeling was often, if not always, mutual. To ignore the Samaritans, in whatever way one encountered them, would not have gone against moral or ethical conduct because the Samaritans were clearly not a part of their community.

Community: its creation and preservation for the sake of grounding our identity is a fundamental moral element in human nature. Over the past month, we have been exploring five moral compass points that social scientists believe to be common to all people, though with different values and expressions from culture to culture. When working on the background for this series, Chris Chakoian realized that today’s lesson contains examples of all five of these morals in action, or inaction as the case may be. So, a quick overview: **Purity** – the Priest and Levite were likely trying to maintain purity laws by not touching a half dead body and risking ritual ‘impurity;’ **Fairness** – the Samaritan questions not only the fair application of the laws, but the fairness of the very laws themselves; **Authority** – what authority do the

actors in this story claim or consult when making decisions about moral and ethical living; **Not doing harm** – perhaps this one is obvious in the case of the robbers who harm the man, but, as we learned last week, the decision not to intervene in harm that is not of our making makes us just as culpable in the crime; and **Community** – with whom do I identify myself and for whom am I responsible and accountable?

In Stephen Pinker's article, "The Moral Instinct," he describes *Community* as that which prompts us to share and sacrifice without an expectation of payback within a defined group of people. It is what Pinker calls "nepotistic altruism," the empathy and solidarity we feel toward our relatives. In humans, of course, communal feelings can be lavished on nonrelatives as well: sometimes because their interests are yoked, like spouses with common children, in-laws with common relatives, friends with common tastes or allies with common enemies. And sometimes our kinship-detectors have been rewired to form community amongst groups of people with other shared interests like fraternities and sororities, city and state groups, parents with children in the same school or team, etc. And this migration of people into 'like' communities is a very natural and healthy process of claiming particular identities for ourselves and others. The problems begin when we are faced with the question of how we interact with and understand people who are outside of our community

As some of you know, I spent a year living in Belfast, Northern Ireland when the civil war between Protestants and Catholics was still raging. One Sunday morning I decided to attend the Reverend Ian Paisley's Church. Rev. Paisley is a self-professed preacher of hatred and intolerance towards Catholics. He has actively worked in political and religious circles his entire life to fan the flames of the civil war. Although he is Presbyterian, the mainline church kicked him out years ago and now he presides over an 'independent' Presbyterian Church. I was curious when I arrived at church and found that Rev. Paisley's sermon title was, "What a Friend we have in Jesus." Over the course of his remarks, he masterfully laid out an understanding of the "we" here in this particular church who have a friend in Jesus, alongside a clear distinction of "them" who are out there and are lost souls for eternity because of their heathen beliefs and practices.

While this is, of course, a rather severe example, perhaps we should not be surprised by this human tendency to want to define ‘our community’ in ways that are comfortable and manageable, in part by also clarifying who is outside of our community. It may be built right into our DNA.

A research study, led by Ernst Fehr at the University of Zurich examined when children learn to share, at what age equality becomes important to them, and whether they are more willing to share with kids they know than with strangers.

For the study, children were offered candy and choices in a scenario called, “The Sharing Treatment.” The child was offered two choices. Choice No. 1: one piece of candy for himself or herself and one piece of candy for another child. Choice No. 2: two pieces for himself or herself, and nothing for the other child. For those of you who are parents, you may not be surprised that at age 3 and 4, less than 9% of children in the sharing treatment chose to give another child they knew one of the pieces of candy. By age 7 and 8, 45% of children chose to share one of the candies. In general, older children chose more consistently egalitarian outcomes in all the scenarios, according to researchers. They were more likely to want everything to be fair.

However, and this is where it gets interesting, the study also says that as children become more egalitarian, they also become more parochial. In some cases, the children were paired with kids from their schools, while sometimes they were paired with kids they did not know. ***At all ages, children were more likely to share with children they knew and that tendency increased with age.*** In other words, as we get older, we have both a stronger desire for fairness within our community AND a stronger instinct not to share outside of our community. The research did not go on to study or propose reasons for this human behavior. I’m not sure myself, but I can imagine a couple of possibilities. Maybe as we get older, we become more aware of the finite resources that we have at our disposal and are inclined, out of a sense of security, to hold on a little tighter. Or maybe as we get older, our prejudices and stereotypes of people outside of our community are reinforced in ways that make it easier to justify ignoring them.

In either case, Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan presents us with a clear challenge. If Jesus has simply wanted to make the point that we should do good deeds for those in need, like stopping to change someone's tire on the side of the road, then he could have used all "local" people in the story, including a local person to act as the hero at the conclusion. However, by intentionally choosing someone outside of the community to act as hero, Jesus is reminding those listening that it is not enough to serve one's own community. Instead, we are called to overcome our impulsive parochial instincts and reach out to the "other." And, by the way, if even a Samaritan is capable of reaching across the borders, then surely you can do so, too. The Samaritan's actions redefine "neighbor" by redefining the ways in which we treat those outside of our own community.

We seek to put this principle into practice through our ministries and mission at First Presbyterian Church in numerous ways. This morning you have a brochure in your bulletin about a new partnership that we are initiating at Neal Junior High School in North Chicago. Although the success of children in North Chicago may or may not ever have a direct impact on our community, we believe that enhancing the education of these "neighbors" only five miles north of us is a critical mission that can break the cycle of poverty for many families. On the south side of Chicago we have a partnership with Hope Presbyterian Church. Again, the success or failure of this congregation and its ministries may or may not ever impact us directly, but as our sister church, we believe that we are called to support them because they are our neighbors. On Thursday night we will have the pastor from Hope Church, Rev. Leslie Sanders, speak to us about gang violence and its impact on his ministry so that we can better understand the challenges that his church faces and the best ways that we can support them in prayer and in action.

While this is a great first step, I think that Jesus is stretching us even a bit further in the parable. Again, if the point of the story was only to model reaching out beyond ourselves, perhaps the Samaritan would have been the victim lying on the side of the road and a local man (like one in Jesus' audience) would have been the hero that reached out to him. However, when it is the Samaritan who reaches out to one like us, we are reminded that in

these border-crossing relationships, we can also be transformed by the gifts, the generosity and insights that these new neighbors offer to us. The new, expanded, relationship of neighbor is, in fact, a two way street.

For example, in the process of participating in missions to North Chicago and Hope Church, we may be transformed by the relationship that forms with people outside of our community in ways that redefine our community. We may discover that we share the same concerns as parents and teachers in North Chicago for our children's well-being and their futures. We may be inspired to a deeper level of faith in God as we witness the strength of Hope Church members fighting to maintain their witness in the face of so much opposition. Our new neighbors may have a lot to teach us and, in the process, we may think differently about how we define neighbor, too.

Bishop Minerva Carcaño, a United Methodist Bishop from Arizona, was recently sharing some reflections with a local group of pastors in Chicago. This past summer she spent some time volunteering with various immigrant ministries. One was in Nogales, on the Mexico side of the border, where they receive people who are deported from the United States. Minerva and another volunteer named Bill worked in a tent where they attended to people's immediate medical concerns, provided them with a bowl of soup and washed people's feet (cutting off calluses, bandaging their blisters, etc.). They met the last bus at the end of the day and walked with everyone from the bus to the tent, but then realized that there was one more family getting off the bus. Melvin, Sr. was walking with a noticeable limp and was accompanied by his two children, his daughter Jocelyn who was ten and his son, Melvin, Jr. who was eight. They learned that Melvin's limp was from a birth defect that intensified with age, eventually forcing him to give up his farm. His wife had recently been diagnosed with cancer and was in need of treatment. Believing he had no other options, Melvin traveled with his children across the border into the United States to try to find work and take some money home. However, because of his disability, he got separated from a larger group and they nearly dehydrated in the desert before being picked up by Border Patrol and being deported back to Nogales.

Minerva and Bill were so moved by his story that they decided to give all of the money they had on them to Melvin so that he could try to get his kids home to his wife. Because there were plenty of people lining the tent who were also in need, they tried to be very discreet in passing along the money and slipped out through the flap in the tent without looking anyone else in the eye. They crossed the dusty courtyard to the pick-up truck that would take them home and, as they stepped up into the cab, they looked back across into the tent. There was Melvin, slowly and deliberately limping back and forth across the tent, carefully distributing the money he had received to everyone else who was there.

I don't know if Melvin knew the story of the Good Samaritan or not, but I do know that he understood what Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans, that we are called to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. In Christ, we are all children of God, all kin in the same kingdom, all invited to share with neighbors near and far. And when it is difficult to reach out beyond our own community and our own interests, when times are tough and the future is unknown, we turn to the living God who promises to give us courage and guidance for the road ahead. For what a friend we have...what a friend we ALL have in Jesus. Amen.