

“Welcoming an Alien?”

Luke 10:25-37

Sermon Series: At the Movies – E.T.

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The year was 1982. I had just graduated high school. My good friend Chris wanted me to go to the movies with him to see some brand-new movie – The Extra Terrestrial. UGH. I was NOT a fan of sci-fi movies. This sounded dreadful. Give me a thriller, a comedy, a heartwarming film. But he would not give up, and I reluctantly said yes.

And of course – I LOVED E.T. As did most of the world. Steven Spielberg’s E.T. the Extra Terrestrial was a massive box office hit – grossing over \$435 million during its initial run and surpassing Star Wars to become the highest grossing film in history. Until 11 years later when it was surpassed by Spielberg’s own Jurassic Park.

And yes, it certainly had elements of sci fi, but it was also a thriller, a comedy and most certainly a heartwarming film. We are showing E.T. for our outdoor (hopefully) movie night this year – August 19th; handout in your bulletin. Come out for an 80s throwback night – bring a friend or two. It’s free – We’ll provide the popcorn, if you are able, bring a donation for local food pantries.

When I rewatched it recently, I saw how E.T. isn’t just about an alien. It’s about loneliness. It’s about a young boy who reaches out to someone everyone else fears. It’s about what happens when compassion becomes greater than fear. It’s a story about who we are called to help.

And that’s exactly what Jesus talks about in our passage for today:

One day an expert in religious law stood up to test Jesus by asking him this question, “Teacher,” he asked, “what should I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus replied, “What does the law of Moses say? How do you read it?”

The man answered, “‘You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength and all your mind, and ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” Right! Jesus told him. Do this and you will live!”

The man wanted to justify his actions, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

Jesus replied with a story.

“A Jewish man was traveling from Jerusalem down to Jericho, and he was attacked by bandits. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him up, and left him half dead beside the road. By chance a Temple priest came along. But when he saw the man lying there, he crossed to the other side of the road and passed him by. A Temple Assistant walked over and looked at him lying there, but he also passed by on the other side.

Then a despised Samaritan came along, and when he saw the man, he felt compassion for him. Going over to him, the Samaritan soothed his wounds with olive oil and wine and bandaged them. Then he put the man on his own donkey and took him to an inn, where he took care of him. The next day he handed the innkeeper two silver coins, telling him, ‘Take care of this man. If his bill runs higher than this, I’ll pay you the next time I’m here.’

“Now which of these three would you say was a neighbor to the man who was attacked by bandits?” Jesus asked.

The man replied, “The one who showed him mercy.”

Then Jesus said, “Yes, now go and do the same.” Luke 10:25 -37. NLT

So what can a young boy’s relationship with an alien teach us about the way God calls us to welcome, to love people?

Let me give you a quick synopsis. E.T. tells the story of Elliot, a lonely young boy who discovers and befriends a very odd-looking alien botanist accidentally left behind by his mothership on Earth. Elliot lives with his mother, brother Michael and younger sister Gertie (played by an adorable young Drew Barrymore – parents in case you forget, there is one scene where Gertie calls Elliot a funny but inappropriate name.

When Elliott first discovers E.T., he is shocked and a bit frightened – after all it’s not every day a strange looking alien appears in your house. But Elliot doesn’t let his fear stop him. His curiosity quickly grows into compassion. Instead of seeing a strange alien, he sees a lost, lonely and scared new friend and sets out to help him.

After getting over their initial freakout about their brother hiding an alien in his closet, Michael and Gertie join him. Together they hide E.T., care for him when he is weak, feed him, protect him from those who would harm him, and help him communicate with his planet and find a way to return home

The way they kids’ treat E.T. echoes the very heart of Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan we just read.

Jesus is being tested by a religious scholar. The man knows the law; he correctly quotes the Law of Moses about what he must do to inherit eternal life. What he is really looking to do is qualify who he must help, so he asks Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

With his follow-up question, our legal expert is trying to justify his actions, looking for that convenient little loophole.

Jesus doesn't give him a free pass; provide an easy out. He tells him a story instead.

The man in distress in Jesus' story is a Jewish man who was beat up by bandits and left half dead on the side of the road. His two fellow Jews, holy men of the Temple, see the man and cross to the other side of the road to pass him by. This was a brother – a fellow Jew they passed by. Not a stranger; perhaps they even knew him. Did they fear becoming “unclean,” being late for Temple duties, or just simply getting involved?

Then the “despised Samaritan” comes upon the man. He has every reason to be fearful – Jews and Samaritans had centuries of hostility between them. The man might look helpless, but it could be a trap – at best he would be ostracized by his fellow Samaritans for helping; at worst it is a trap and others are just waiting to jump him.

The Samaritan feels compassion for the man and pushing past any fears, soothes and bandages his wounds, carries him to safety, pays for his care and makes sure he is not alone.

Jesus ends the story with a simple yet powerful command: “Go and do the same.”

Why do we often choose to see people as strangers instead of neighbors?

The adults in E.T. see an alien. A threat. A scientific experiment. A problem to solve. And they strategize.

The priest and temple assistant see a bother not a brother-- someone who might interrupt their plans, cause them problems. And they walk away.

The kids in E.T., however, see someone who is lonely, someone in need. A friend. And they reach out and help.

Likewise, the Samaritan sees a person in need. And he reaches out to help.

Have you ever noticed how we are often quick to label people?

Instead of seeing a neighbor, we see: The immigrant, the addict, the homeless woman, the difficult coworker, that weird kid, the political opponent.

Jesus says see the person first.

To Jesus' audience, the Samaritan was a very unexpected hero. Listeners would have labeled him the “bad guy,” thoroughly expecting him to ignore the injured man – or finish him off.

Instead, this despised Samaritan crosses social, cultural, and ethnic barriers to show compassion. The “Good Samaritan” sees a person in need, a neighbor, and stops and goes out of his way to take care of him.

That is exactly what Jesus did for us. We like to imagine ourselves as Elliott – befriending the sweet alien and saving the day. But really -- we’re E.T. We were the ones far from home. We were separated from God; strangers to God. And instead of leaving us there, Jesus came looking for us. He crossed the greatest distance imaginable to bring us home. Now Jesus says, Go and do the same.

Welcoming the stranger isn’t just a nice idea Jesus came up with while kicking back with his disciples. It’s a major tenet, woven throughout the entire story of Scripture.

In the Torah, God commands the Israelites to “Never forget – you were once the stranger. So, when you meet a stranger, remember your own story.”

In Matthew 25, Jesus tells his followers that welcoming strangers becomes an act of love toward Christ himself. “I was a stranger and you invited me in...” “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”

In Hebrews, we are reminded that every encounter we have welcoming others may have greater significance than we will ever realize. “Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.” Hebrews 13:1-2.

And in Romans, Paul tells us, “Accept each other just as Christ has accepted you so that God will be given the glory.” We welcome people because Jesus welcomed us first. And told us to do the same.

Jesus doesn’t tell us to ignore wisdom or personal safety. But he consistently calls us to move toward people with compassion instead of allowing fear, prejudice, or inconvenience to keep us at a distance.

My friend Jen has a big, big heart. She’s also a busy mom with a lot on her plate, especially right now. She and I were talking recently, and I told her I was working on this week’s Message about how God calls us to help others. We talked about how great the need is and can sometimes feel overwhelming. She shared with me something that happened to her recently. She was outside a coffee shop, and a man was asking for help, “I just need a cup of coffee. Anyone? I just need coffee.” “Please...”

Can’t you just picture the scene on that busy street-- Everyone else hurrying by. Eyes down. Earbuds in. Looking away. Crossing the street. Not Jen. Coffee? She could relate (me too!). She went up to the man and invited him to come into the coffee shop. “Order anything you’d like,” Jen said. The man ordered a \$3.00 cup of coffee. “Anything else?” “No, just coffee,” the man replied. Just coffee.

Maybe what he needed most wasn't just caffeine. Maybe what he needed was someone to simply see him.

In another parable – the parable of the sheep and the goats, Jesus tells us that God will separate his obedient followers – sheep -- from pretenders and unbelievers -- goats. The parable describes acts of serving we can all do every day. And the eternal importance of doing so.

Jesus says to the sheep, “Come you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world. For I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me into your house. I was naked, and you gave me clothing. I was sick, and you cared for me. I was in prison, and you visited me...I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me.” Matthew 25:34-36; 40. And let's just say the goats – those whose faith is not real; whose action don't show the love of Jesus -- don't get invited to come. Banished forever from the family of God.

Growing up, my youth group did a production of the musical Godspell. It was a light-hearted depiction of the gospel. Until we got to the hard stuff. The scene Jesus where Jesus separates the goats from the sheep terrified me. I feverishly wanted to believe I was a sheep, but did I do enough? Did I help everyone who needed help?

Thankfully by reading and studying the Bible, I've gained a deeper understanding of Jesus' teaching. Jesus isn't saying that we're saved by serving people – the Bible clearly and repeatedly teaches that salvation is by faith through the grace of God and not by our good works. Let me say that again – salvation is by faith through the grace of God and NOT by our good works.

Jesus is teaching that people who have truly received His grace begin to reflect His heart. Good works are not the cause of salvation but the effect of salvation. True followers of Christ will treat others with kindness, serving them as if they were serving Christ himself.

As I was writing this Message, I read the NLT commentary on this passage to dig deeper into what Jesus is calling us to do. The commentary reads as follows: “To treat each person we encounter as if he or she were Jesus is no easy task. What we do for others demonstrates what we really think about Jesus's words to us: Feed those who are hungry, give homeless people a place to stay, take care of widows/widowers, minister to refugees, look after those who are poor or sick, care for those in prison. The commentary ends with a challenge: What can you, your church or your small group do to begin helping in these ways?1

Woodside, we do these things! You do these things! I see it all the time. I see it when our Welcome Team reaches out to someone new, walking in alone, looking a little anxious. I see it monthly when our Dinner Ministry opens the doors and people are treated to a delicious meal and night of friendship. I see it when people from this church visit and mentor those in prison. I see it on cold winter nights when we turn our Vineyard Worship space into a warm shelter for those who are unhoused. I see it when our Kids with a Mission kids and parents put together 90

Blessing Bags for those in need on the streets of Kensington. I see it when teens and adults head out to Trenton and Philadelphia to bring food, support and the love of Jesus. I see it quarterly when we welcome anyone in recovery and those who love them to a delicious meal and powerful Worship Service. I see it when our growth groups, Deacons, Reach ministers, and our Young at Heart group come together to support members who are ill or going through tough times. And this just highlights only a few of the many amazing ways you all serve.

And we're hoping to add a new program – very apt title - Welcoming the Stranger Conversation Café – where volunteers will be paired with a small group of immigrant and refugee students to practice casual conversation skills. If you'd like to learn more about this program, check the box on your Connection Card and we'll keep you posted.

Like the Good Samaritan, Elliott crossed the road, so to speak. He moved toward someone who was different, vulnerable, and in need. His choice reminds us that every act of compassion begins with a simple decision: to see a stranger not as a problem to fear, but as a neighbor to love.

This week, God is going to place someone in front of you.

You won't hear a voice from heaven.

You probably won't meet an alien.

It might be

the cashier

the new coworker

the widow

the teen sitting alone

the immigrant struggling with English

the visitor standing by herself at coffee hour after Worship.

the person everyone else avoids

And in that moment,

Jesus will quietly whisper the same words He spoke nearly two thousand years ago.

"Go and do the same."

Your neighbor is not defined by where they live

Your neighbor is anyone God places in front of you.

So this week...

Cross the road.

Open your eyes.

Open your heart.

And let someone experience the welcome of Christ because they met you.