NO ONE IS THE OTHER

Luke 10:25-37 (NASB)

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Years ago my wife and I went on a mini vacation in Canandaigua, New York. It is a lovely little town on the northern tip of one of New York’s finger lakes. We spent a few days in a bed and breakfast, bicycling, and wind surfing. After getting nice and tired we did some shopping. We visited a large furniture store from which we eventually bought a chair and an end table. We also visited a motorcycle shop so I could browse for fun.

I had some technical questions for the sales guy, and he said he would need to get Max, their mechanic, out of the shop to answer me. Max was about my height, strong and muscular, and had very hairy arms. He also had very hairy legs which were draped in a filmy satin skirt with a lovely floral print. I asked my questions and he answered me in a very knowledgeable and friendly way.

And I had quite a bit of trouble staying focused on our conversation. I wanted to look at Max’s skirt, but, with great difficulty, I forced myself to keep staring into his eyes. My guess is that Max was on the first step to living as a woman. At that time, doctors used to insist that people who wanted to live as the other sex try it for a prescribed length of time before any irreversible treatment would be done.

The church has not always done well helping people like Max. One the one hand, we simply don’t know what to do. On the other hand, it has been all too easy to think that since Max seems to be on a journey away from Christ that we are relieved of our responsibility to minister to him. He will probably reject what we have to say anyway. And increasingly, people like Max have joined together and become strident activists who push back pretty hard against traditional Christians.

How do we help Max?

1. LOVE OUR NEIGHBOR AS OURSELVES

Jesus met a man who came with a test question about eternal life which raised the issue of what God requires of us as we meet people who seem to be across a great divide: **“And a lawyer stood up and put Him to the test, saying, "’Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?’ And He said to him, ‘What is written in the Law? How does it read to you?’ And he 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 He said to him, ‘You have answered correctly; DO THIS AND YOU WILL LIVE’"** (LUKE 10:25-28 NASB, caps in orig.).

Most of us can quote these verses. We know that Jesus commands us to love our neighbor. It is the doing of it which is so hard. Jesus’ answer to the question of how to help Max is straightforward: Figure out how to express the love of God to the guy. But the lawyer had a further question with which, if we are honest with ourselves, we have found ourselves wrestling as well.

2. TREAT NO ONE AS THE OTHER

**“But wishing to justify himself, he said to Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’”** (Luke 10:29). Built into the lawyer’s question is the idea that people may be so far across a divide from us that we are not required by God to identify them as our neighbor and show God’s love to them. Jesus responded to this critical teaching moment with a most familiar parable. And our great challenge is to keep ourselves from thinking that the parable was spoken for someone else rather than us.

**“Jesus replied and said, ‘A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among robbers, and they stripped him and beat him, and went away leaving him half dead. And by chance a priest was going down on that road, and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. Likewise a Levite also, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side”** (Luke 10:30-32).

The robbers treated the beaten man as the “other.” Once you no longer see a person as a human being, you can do anything to him or her. They saw their prey as having no value, not worth caring about, and available for ultimate abuse. They beat him half dead and took his things.

Taken to its final conclusion, seeing people as the “other” results in genocide which is mass murder of people of a different ethnicity. It results in forced organ harvesting which is going on right now in China. It results in concentration camps, human experimentation, and gas chambers like in Nazi Germany. It results in the killing fields of Cambodia. It results in Siberian work camps and the gulags of the former Soviet Union. It results in chattel slavery in America where people were treated like tools to be used, abused, and cast away. It results in endless murders taking place between gangs in our cities. And on and on.

But the parable does not end with the robbers. A priest, someone who was responsible as a mediator between people and God, simply left the man to his fate. He may have been returning from serving in the temple and trying to avoid ceremonial defilement from a legalistic perspective. And a Levite, who would have been a helper in the same temple, may have been trying to do the same.

The parable draws a painfully sharp comparison between the robbers and two religious men. They should have known better! It is certain that they knew that God had commanded them to love their neighbor. It is also certain that they knew that the law taught them that saving a life is more important than following ceremonial rules. But they were part of a hugely powerful culture which allowed them to treat some people as the other—not worth their trouble or compassion. In fact, the legalistic Jews of Jesus’ day were very comfortable hating non-Jews, some more than others. And, of course, many non-Jews hated them back.

Let’s be completely clear. God’s word says: **“Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin”** (James 4:17). And in the case of the beaten man, it was a sin likely to have caused the man’s death.

Our instinct is to deny that we would ever treat someone as the other, and yet the church is rife with it: masks versus no masks, shots versus no shots, complementarian versus egalitarian, hipsters versus squares, Democrat versus Republican, Calvinists versus Arminians, charismatics versus cessationists, people from here versus people who are not from here, and so on. We don’t kill each other over these things, though church history is full of such killings. But the moment we refuse to talk or associate with other Christians over such matters, the moment we disfellowship one another, the moment we think of other Christians as people for whom we are not responsible, we are treating them as the other. It is hate. Along with the priest and Levite, Jesus has skewered us on his parable.

The parable also draws another painfully sharp contrast: **“But a Samaritan, who was on a journey, came upon him; and when he saw him, he felt compassion, and came to him and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them; and he put him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn and took care of him. On the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper and said, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I return I will repay you.' Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers' hands? And he said, ‘The one who showed mercy toward him.’ Then Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do the same’”** (Luke 10:33-37).

The Samaritan, who would not have known the law of God which the priest and Levite knew, nevertheless did not treat the beaten man as the other. Look at the elements of treating everyone as your neighbor: First, he felt compassion. This is evidence of an inward response which reflects the character of God. God cares for the needy, no matter who they are, and so should we. Second, the Samaritan took immediate action to help the beaten man. He bandaged and treated the man’s wounds in the manner of that day using his own possessions. He lifted the man onto his own beast. He situated the man in a safe place. He actively cared for the injured man. When he had to go, he left money for others to care for him. And here is the sharpest point which impales us all: The Samaritan promised to repay the innkeeper for whatever extra he may have needed to spend. It would have been easy for the Samaritan to wash his hands of the matter, but he refused to do so.

The lawyer had to admit that the one who showed mercy is the one who proved to be a neighbor. **“Go and do the same”** Jesus said to him and also to us. No one is the other. We are never free to reject others, ignore their needs, wash our hands of them, or treat them as sub-humans.

3. EMBRACE THE VALUE OF THE PERSON

There are two crucial biblical foundation stones which guide and help us to act as merciful neighbors to others, no matter how different from us they may be. The first is the value of the person.

The value of every person, no matter how sinful or broken, is rooted in the reality that every person has been made in God’s image, as we learn from the book of Genesis: **“God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them”** (1:27). That means that when we are facing any person in the eyes, we must be able to treat them as valuable in God’s sight. It is not enough to believe that doctrine and then pick and choose with whom we will relate. And every person we meet should be able to read our belief in their value to God by the way we speak to them and treat them.

Jesus Christ did this unerringly. Who would know better just how sinful every person is? And yet listen to his interaction with the most fallen people**: “Now all the tax collectors and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him. Both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them’”** (Luke 15:1-2). Jesus did not merely get near sinners in order to shoot out the gospel and then withdraw. He actively welcomed them to himself. And the most important thing is that the sinners believed it! They apparently did not feel treated as the other by the Lord because they willingly associated with him and ate with him.

When we look into the eyes of a person who identifies as gay or transgender, who is a radical political activist, who is a drug abuser, who has done a terrible crime--insert whatever thing is hard for you and I to overlook—does that person smell that we consider them as the other? Or do they sense that we receive them as persons bearing the value which God has placed on them? Because that is what every person who enters our church doors is wondering. *Does the church which Jesus founded help people like me?* *Or will they reject me instantly once they know the mess I am in?*

Christ practiced something which is a keystone of modern counseling called unconditional positive regard. In counseling it means that we refuse judgment of others and choose to treat every person as worth helping. In the practice of therapy it works whether we believe it or not. But the example of Jesus shows that he believed it, and so must we or we will never get past the things which divide us. We will never get close enough to most people to bring them what they need most. If they think that we consider them the other, they will be gone in a flash. In Jesus, no one is the other.

A story about this issue is told of Moishe Rosen, the founder of Jews for Jesus. Moishe taught his team to do street witnessing to Jewish people and he did a lot of it himself. There was a day when Moishe was telling a Jewish man with a black fedora and forelocks all the prophetic proofs that Jesus of Nazareth is, in fact, the Jewish Messiah. The man stopped him and said: “If that is what you believe about Jesus then you are my enemy and I refuse to speak with you.” As the man was turning away, Moishe responded: “I refuse your enemyship”—and just kept talking! Moishe was operating by faith in *Hameshiach* who taught: **“Love your enemies.”** And so must we.

4. BRING THE SUFFICIENCY OF CHRIST TO EVERY PERSON

So the first question when looking into the eyes of another person is: How do I express the value of the person to them? And the second question is: How do I bring the sufficiency of Christ into this person’s life? The first question gets us an open door, and the second brings the only hope that matters.

Do we believe that what Jesus gives his servants is sufficient to enable us to work with people on the other side of seemingly impenetrable human barriers? And do we believe that the grace and truth of Jesus Christ is sufficient to meet the true needs of every broken person, no matter how broken, mistaken, or wayward? Because if we do not believe in the sufficiency of Christ there is no hope for lost people.

Paul said of his manner of interacting with other people: **“To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are under the Law; to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, so that I might win those who are without law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all people, so that I may by all means save some”** (1 Corinthians 9:20-22).

This is not the sound of a superstar explaining what he accomplished in human strength. He wrote that Christ enabled him to leap every human barrier: **“Such confidence we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life”** (2 Corinthians 3:4-6). The Holy Spirit will enable us to leap every human barrier we face as well.

And Jesus’ sufficiency to help every person is the basis of this sweet appeal: **“Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS”** (Matthew 11:28-29). No one is beyond receiving forgiveness, healing, purpose, and rest in Jesus. The invitation is given to all. Christ’s sacrifice was done once for all and is the total provision for our souls. No one is the other in the kingdom of God.

Now, when the sufficiency of Christ comes to any person life change is the outcome. Paul wrote: **“Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God. Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God”** (1 Corinthians 6:9-11). These horrible sins were past tense in the lives of the believers in Corinth because Jesus changes everything.

It is not our job to bring life change to people, but life change will always come to those who truly trust Christ. Our job is to bring the sufficiency of Christ through the gospel—but it must be the real, unadulterated gospel.

There is a well-known Christian author who has no doubt done a lot of good by his many books. But he holds the view that no believer can be fully-formed in Christ without the powerful application of human scrutiny. He teaches that we must all sit before a group of other Christians who will evaluate our walk with Christ, tell us everything that is wrong with us, and tell us how to do better. I call this the gospel of human scrutiny. Jesus, his word, and the Holy Spirit of God are not enough in his view. And now, late in life, he has gone so far as to openly add works to his view of the gospel.

It is, in contrast, the word of God which is entirely sufficient to hold the mirror to each one of us and guide our process of change by the power of the Holy Spirit. That word is going to be a strong challenge to every person because you can’t receive Christ without embracing the life change he will bring. It may go so far as to bring a complete revolution in self-identity. Not everyone will want to do that. But if we believe that Christ’s word is sufficient we will not compromise it or back down from what it says.

What does motorcycle mechanic Max need from us?

First, Max needs us not to treat him as the other—someone we run away from and leave to his fate.

Second, Max needs to have the love of Christ expressed to him as our neighbor.

Third, Max needs to hear from us and read on our countenance that he is valued as a person made in the image of God.

Fourth, Max needs us to bring to him the sufficiency of Christ for his soul. He has no hope for salvation and transformation without it. We are the ones called by God to bring healing to every man, woman, and child beaten half to death and lying in the road. Jesus says simply: “Go and do this.” Because that is what Jesus did for us.

[Schodack, 4.16.23; District Conference, 5.6.24]