



First United Church of Oak Park

Our Neighbors, Ourselves

Luke 10:25-37

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About 10 days ago I saw a short piece on the PBS Evening News about a modern-day version of this parable. In it, the author Karen Russell talks about taking her two-year-old son to day care for the first time. She is anxious about the drop off and had prepared by packing up her son's comfort blanket, extra clothes, and, as she put it, "enough diapers to last until college." As she talked, I remembered what a big deal it had been to take our kids to a new school, especially when they were very young. I could sympathize with her as she described how her senses were on high alert as they went to day care on that first day.

As Russell and her son walk into the building, they pass someone lying on the street, where he had probably spent the night. He's a homeless man, and Russell notices her son look up at her for guidance. She imagines him thinking, "Was this normal? Should I be concerned?" She continues to wonder, "Should [she] be concerned?" She asks, "How do we tell the story of suffering to our children?"

Russell reports that when she went online for parenting advice, the sites she consulted told her to shift attention away from the homeless person's need, in order to assure her son that she would keep him safe.¹ The internet insisted that "You are safe," should be the primary message that the little boy received.

To what should we be paying attention? As Christians, as human beings, as moms and dads and sons and daughters, how should we regard the sight of someone sleeping on the sidewalk? Or, to put it in terms of our parable, how should we regard the sight of a person lying beaten and half-dead on the side of the road?

In our parable, two of the protagonists do not seem to regard him at all. The priest and the Levite pass by on the other side. Are they concerned about the man in the ditch? Should they be? Do they even notice him? Does his presence register with them in any way?

We assume it does. We assume that both the priest and the Levite see the man – that's what the text says – and we further assume that they make a deliberate choice to keep on walking. Are we justified in making that assumption?

Last week, I read an article in *The Christian Century* about prayer.² The author opened the article with a description of a psychology project that tests visual cognition. You may be familiar with this project because, apparently, it's fairly well known though I knew nothing about it. The project is called "the invisible gorilla."³

¹ Karen Russell. "Telling the Truth." PBS Evening News segment *In My Humble Opinion*. July 1, 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7of3ITSfoUo&list=PLgawtcOBBjr-lswJuOBd4xezidS_awHTR&index=2&t=0s

² Andrew Root. "Forming a People Who Pray." *The Christian Century* 136:14 (July 3, 2019), 20-23.

³ See this experiment on YouTube here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UtKt8YF7dgQ>

This is how it works: The researchers show a short video, about a minute long, of 6 people moving around, sort of in a circle but not really very ordered. Three of the people walking around are wearing white shirts, and 3 are wearing black shirts. The people in the white shirts are passing a basketball to each other. They move around and throw the ball; the people in the black shirts dart this way and that. The people viewing the video are asked to count how many times the basketball is passed. Viewers are focused on the people wearing white shirts and the basketball.

As the basketball is being passed, someone wearing a gorilla suit walks into the middle of the group, beats his or her chest for a second or two, and then walks off stage. Later, observers are asked how many times the basketball was passed, and they give an answer: 15, 16. Then they are asked if they saw a gorilla, and about half of them say “no.” Half the people watching this video do not see the gorilla.

Daniel Simons, the researcher who conducted this and similar experiments, says that looking is not the same as seeing. We have to pay attention to something in order to be able to see it, and at any instant we only take in a tiny amount of visual detail. We miss a good deal – we miss someone in a gorilla suit walking through a group of people – and thus we do not always see the world as it is. Instead, we see what we are asked to see (people in white shirts, passing a basketball); what we see is shaped by our assumptions and expectations and world views. And, in turn, what we see reinforces those preconceptions.⁴

Karen Russell wonders how she should be teaching her child to see and interpret the world. That is really the question that this very familiar text raises for us. How should we see and interpret the world? How should our attention be focused? The two greatest commandments tell us to love God with all we have, love our neighbors, and love ourselves. Jesus suggests that the best way to accomplish this is to embody our love in daily, human interaction. He further suggests that to be able to share love in this way, we have to be able to pay attention to one another’s suffering.

Brene Brown is a professor of social work who burst into prominence on TED Talks a couple of years ago with a presentation about vulnerability.⁵ Much of her research focuses on human capacities like compassion and empathy. She has much to teach us about caring. She thinks of compassion as a collective value: the deep belief that we are “inextricably connected to each other in love and goodness.”⁶

Empathy, though, she thinks of as an interpersonal capacity, the ability to bring compassion alive. The Samaritan has empathy for the man lying on the side of the road. That is what compels him to stop and help.

To be empathetic requires four things, according to Brene Brown: First, it requires that we find a way to walk in somebody else’s shoes, to see the world from their perspective. Second, it requires that we do that without judgment; we accept their perspective for what it is. Third, empathy requires that we understand not only another person’s perspective but also their feelings. Are they angry? Hurt? In pain? Finally, empathy requires that we be able to communicate our understanding of perspective and feeling to the person to whom we’re reaching out. The Samaritan communicates understanding when he ministers to the man’s wounds and takes him to the inn.

⁴ Daniel Simons, Ted Talk, “Seeing the World as It Isn’t.” https://youtu.be/9Il_D3Xt9W0.

⁵ Brene Brown. “The Power of Vulnerability.” https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability?language=en

⁶ Brene Brown. Empathy, compassion, and boundaries. <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=10153967066765682>. I may not have this quote exactly right, but it’s close.

As Brown understands and teaches it, empathy demands vulnerability. It gets us out of our comfort zone and makes us think about the world from somebody else's perspective. It forces us to let go of our own deep satisfaction about being right. It may even entail taking personal risks.

That is something Jesus doesn't talk about in this parable – the personal risks that the Samaritan might be taking. The Jericho road was apparently a dangerous stretch. As is true of some neighborhoods in Chicago, it may not have been an area where you wanted to pull over and get out of your car and help a stranger. You know all the tapes that play through your head in those sorts of situations; maybe they are playing through the Samaritan's head, too. Empathy demands vulnerability. It pushes the envelopes of our comfort and safety.

Yet empathy is not completely open-ended. Brene Brown also speaks extensively of the importance of having boundaries.⁷ There are some things that are OK, and there are some things that are not OK, and we need to be clear about what those things are. Safety matters, both the safety of those lying beaten and half-dead on the side of the road and the safety of those who might stop and help.

Empathy lives in that in-between space, with compassion and vulnerability on the one side and legitimate boundaries and concern for safety on the other. Empathy lives in that tension. Karen Russell's story is a good example of that. She's cognizant of the need to keep her son safe, as all decent mothers are, and yet she wants more for him than safety.

As she talks about wanting more for him than safety, she makes an interesting turn. She notes how passive the internet makes her son when it talks about giving him the message "You are safe." There is no agency in this for him. Granted, her son is only 2 years old, but she is thinking longer term. But on this internet site, no matter how old he is, her son is just an object of her safekeeping. She's not satisfied with that. She says she wants to raise him in a way that makes him active instead of passive. She wants to give him agency. To do that she has to be able to teach him about the world's reality: to pay attention to its injustices and its cruelty. At the same time, she wants to teach him to be dissatisfied with that, and show him how he can make a difference. She wants to raise him to have an active, empathetic role in the world.

Jesus prods the lawyer in the same direction – to agency and action. It is not the lawyer's first choice. The lawyer wants to keep things at a neat and tidy distance, and perhaps we recognize that impulse. "Who is my neighbor?" he asks Jesus. The lawyer is playing it safe. There is little agency in a question that is so abstract, little that would require him to get his hands dirty.

And Jesus very deftly tells a story that shifts the lawyer's attention in another direction. "Who is my neighbor?" is no longer the question. The question instead is "Who steps up to the plate as neighbor to the man on the side of the road?" Who becomes neighbor?

That is the question. And Jesus poses it again and again. When we are blind to the suffering in front of our eyes: Who becomes neighbor? When we ask safe and easy questions that distance us from people's misery: Who becomes neighbor? When we make excuses for why we can't or won't reach out: Who becomes neighbor?

Who indeed?

⁷ Brown. Empathy, compassion, and boundaries.