

## Loving neighbor more than self

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*“... we must offer a compassionate response, but we must also learn to ask what contributes to the pain and the poverty of so many families in our communities.”*

I have recently been struck by several interpretations of Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan. In this passage from Luke’s gospel, Jesus is calling his followers and others who had gathered to love their neighbors, and he tells this story in response to one cynic’s question, “Who is my neighbor?”

You know Jesus’ offer of compassion and loving-kindness, but I have come to see how the story is one in which the love it references is rooted in working for justice. We all know the basic meaning and the core struggle of this story. Like the lawyer who questioned Jesus, we know who our neighbor is and we know we are called to respond with mercy. But there are so many people hurt and dying by the sides of the roads in our cities that, at best, we shrug out shoulders feeling overwhelmed by the needs and, at worse, we drive around the needs of our neighbors avoiding ‘those’ parts of town where ‘they’ live.

Adding to the immensity of the story and the scope of the work there is to be done, a group of students recently reminded me of the commentary by early 20th century American Baptist and social gospel preacher, Walter Rauschenbusch. He emphasizes the relationship between the charitable love of the Samaritan and the need for justice in our communities where we see many people whose lives have been affected by generations of poverty. He reminds us that mercy and justice often go together in what we are called to do, as in Micah 6:8. Rauschenbusch says that we must offer a compassionate response, but we must also learn to ask what contributes to the pain and the poverty of so many families in our communities. He writes,

“The good Samaritan did not go after the robbers with a shot gun but looked after the wounded and helpless man by the wayside. But if hundreds of good Samaritans travelling the same road should find thousands of bruised men groaning to them they would not be such very good Samaritans if they did not organize a vigilance committee to stop the manufacturing of wounded men.”

Seeing this passage again reminds me of another similar struggle with the meaning of Jesus’ parable from recent American history. Andrew Young, Civil Rights leader, former U.S. congressman, mayor of Atlanta, GA, and our nation’s first African-American ambassador to the United Nations, recounts a conversation he had with his friend, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

King told Young, “The Good Samaritan is a great individual. I, of course, like and respect the Good Samaritan, but I

don't want to be a Good Samaritan. I am tired of picking up people along the Jericho Road. I am tired of seeing people battered and bruised and bloody, injured and jumped on, along the Jericho Roads of life. This road is dangerous and I don't want to pick up anyone else along this Jericho Road; I want to fix the Jericho Road. I want to pave the Jericho Road, add street lights to the Jericho Road; make the Jericho Road safe for everybody."

In Dr. King's final speech, we hear another reference to the Good Samaritan story. King returns to Jesus' parable about the dangerous Jericho Road and asks why the Priest and Levite didn't stop. He gives the usual answers about the uncertainty and impurity of helping a beaten and bloody stranger, but Dr. King says fear is the most significant factor. But, he continues, fear is not the only response offered; the Samaritan is distinct as he takes a stand for the man maimed by the side of the road. Dr. King offers this:

"If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?" But then the Good Samaritan came by, and he reversed the question, 'If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?' That's the question before you tonight. Not, 'If I stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to all of the hours that I usually spend in my office every day and every week as a pastor?' The question is not, 'If I stop to help this man in need, what will happen to me?' 'If I do not stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to them?' That is the question. So, let us rise up tonight with a greater readiness. Let us stand with a greater determination. And let us move on in these powerful days, these days of challenge to make America what it ought to be."

The next day, Dr. King was murdered. His life ended with the question 'What will happen to my neighbor?' rather than 'What will happen to me?' As I recount these words, and each interpretation of this passage from Luke, Jesus' challenge seems so simple, yet seemingly impossible. I know who my neighbors are; I have some idea about their needs. If I listened to them, I would know more. I must take the

steps to become more interested in my neighbors and their needs and less interested in my own.

One of the things I love about this journal is the way the stories you share are able to inspire us to look beyond our own needs. The story from Walker Moore was first sent out as a shorter e-mail after a community event, the foundations of which were rooted in overcoming his fear of a particular neighborhood. In time, he found the courage and clarity of call that he needed, and since then he has clearly been more focused on the needs of his neighbors than on his own.

We see other references to looking out for others throughout the journal. A research article by Joe Wilmouth and David Fournier addresses one of the most common pictures of love in Christian circles, the love that serves as the basis for healthy marriages. These authors offer a study that looks at the barriers to marriage preparation and education, and do so with the belief that healthy marriages make for healthy communities.

The Faith in Action column by journal board member, Heidi Unruh, offers several components that she sees as foundational for churches seeking to transform their communities. She uses the metaphor of a journey to help us travel down this road, providing an invaluable resource that complements our Walking Alongside curriculum.

Another friend of the journal, Terry York, helps us understand the value of teaching our children the "voice" of our faith and of our congregations, as we teach them core values, such as the value of love and justice seen in the story above.

In each of these writings and in the other items in this issue, I continue to learn what it means to look beyond my own needs as I engage in ministry. It is my hope that you are encouraged and empowered to do the same. As you read, consider the ways you are being continually called to offer loving-kindness and, at the same time, to work for justice. And, as always, please let us hear your responses to what we are offering in these pages.