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What does a neighbour look like?  
Martin Grove United Church  
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Based on Luke 10:25-37

The story of the good Samaritan that we read from Luke today is such a classic Jesus story. It is part of modern culture, even for non-Christians. You might have seen the story performed as a play, or as a skit. But did you know that the story of the good Samaritan has also been turned into a scientific experiment? In 1973, an experiment was performed - which was called “the good Samaritan experiment” - to try to work out what it was that motivated or prevented people from helping other people in need - people that you just sort of run into while you are rushing somewhere yourself.

I should be embarrassed to tell you that they tested seminary students. The setup was something like this: Students were asked to start a project in one building on campus. At a particular time, they were sent to another building to complete the project. Some students were told that when they got to the second building, they would have to give a short talk about jobs in ministry. Other students were told that they would have to give a short talk about the story of the good Samaritan. Moreover, some students were told that they were already late for their talk, and that they’d better rush on over, while some were told that they had to give their talk soon, but that they had a couple of minutes to get there and to get ready.

The scientists who performed this experiment (never trust a scientist) had arranged for an actor to be on the path between the two buildings and the actor would play a victim. I couldn’t find any pictures of this, but the actor as victim was able to convey need, and coughed twice for extra attention when the students approached. So - it was a setup. The test, of course, was to see which students actually helped the victim, and which students sailed on by.

I’m sure we all know how this experiment turned out. We are all human beings after all. It turned out that those students preparing in their own minds to speak about the story of the good Samaritan were no more or less likely to stop and help the victim - to

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actually take the role of the good Samaritan themselves in real life. What did make a difference - by the way - was how rushed the students felt. Most of the students who though they had a bit of time stopped to help the victim and very few of the students who thought that they were already late stopped to help.

*[descend and ask - what is the good samaritan story about?]*

I can still remember that as a child, the story of the good Samaritan didn't really make sense to me. Oh, I got the basic point - that demonstrating love for each other in practical ways is what makes good neighbours - that digging into our own pockets to help people less fortunate is part of the good news that Jesus spoke about. But I missed the underlying meaning that emerges when we consider who the Samaritans actually were. The "good person" in the story is not the "good Samaritan" by random chance.

The Old Testament gives a long history of a group of people. We often think the Old Testament is the history of Jewish people, but it's a bit more complicated - and far more interesting - than that. For one thing, as time progresses through the story, the name and the identity of the group changes. In the first stories, there are no groups, just single people, like Noah. Then, groups appear and the people are called "Hebrews". After the people leave Egypt and are heading to Palestine, they are called "Israelites". But in the 6th Century BC, Babylon invaded Israel and the people were exiled to Babylon. That's where we get some great songs, like "By the Rivers of Babylon". Scholars believe that the Old Testament was first written down during the exile. The exile was a formative time for Jewish identity.

But even that is simplistic. The Babylonians were smart people. They wanted managers, administrators and scribes, not field workers. The Babylonians took the land owners, the wealthy, the elite, and the educated, not the workers or the common people. At the end of the Babylonians exile, we often say that the people returned to Israel. But in fact, most of the people never left. It was the former ruling class that was exiled to Babylon and then later returned. And that ruling class found that life in Israel was humming along just fine without them. The common people, the workers of the land,

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were doing just fine. But of course, the former rulers wanted to regain their former control and status.

The exiles who returned to Israel were the first group we would call “Jewish”, and the people working the land, who never went into exile, we now call “Samaritans”. Now can you imagine the sense of hatred in our gospel story? The hatred between Jewish people and Samaritans is the sort of fiery hatred that can only develop between members of the same family.

So when Jesus told this story - you can just imagine the reaction. How can the hero of the story not be one of us? How can the hero be a Samaritan - one of them - one of the low class? One of our enemies? If that’s how Jesus preached, it’s not hard to imagine why he was killed.

When Jesus spoke today’s story, part of his message was not news at all to his audience. The command to love God with all your heart, soul, and mind is found in Deuteronomy. The command to love your neighbour as yourself is found in Leviticus, although “neighbour” in that text mean only people inside your own cultural group. The crux of this story is not how Jesus combines these two commands, but rather, how Jesus interprets “neighbour”. So make no mistake, Jesus’s interpretation of “neighbour” in this story to include even your enemies was scandalous.

I’m sorry - did I say WAS scandalous? I meant IS scandalous! Because it is *still scandalous* today to preach that love for all includes one’s enemies. I invite each of us to retell this story - to ourselves, in private - but to replace the word “Samaritan” with whatever group you struggle the most with to embrace. And imagine that you are hearing the story from the lips of Jesus. And appreciate the scandal of the good news for yourself.

The story of the good samaritan is scandalous. Because the message of the good samaritan is not really “help other people”, but rather, that God appears in unlikely places. God turns our prejudices and expectations upside down. The point of the good samaritan story is not that we should help the person who was robbed and wounded - although obviously we should. The point of the story was how “righteous”, “religious”, “trained” people who should know better often fail to act out the gospel, while those

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people we consider outsiders, outcasts, and strangers, sometimes live out the gospel without hesitation. The message is that we should watch out for the lowly, the dubious, the suspicious in our midst - *not* because we need to defend ourselves from them - but because God is probably already at work within them, in their midst, in our midst. Consider this video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w6WGdDoTVoo>

This always sound so simple. But of course, the real trick is to actually live out that vision. I think that deep down we all know that creating the kingdom of God on earth includes embracing the gift of people we might normally ignore or walk past.

I almost fell off my bicycle this week when I saw a poster in a bus shelter. It's the image on our bulletin cover today. I like the image because it is stark, but visual and striking. And because today, Muslims in Canada are treated a lot like Samaritans. I personally have a lot of interest in Muslim/Christian relations, but today, I use that simply as an example. Each of us carries our own sense of who is just "beyond" who we consider acceptable and I invite each of us to consider who it is that we consider outsiders. Who are today's Samaritans for you?

And think back over the last 20 years or so. What people have you learned to be comfortable with? What people have you learned to embrace? What people have you come to accept as children of God? What people have you come to see as a gift from God?

"How can an enemy be our neighbour? Perhaps a better question is, "How can we consider our own neighbours to be our enemies?" The people we live with. The people we work with. The people we share our hopes and dreams with. We are all children of God. Who can we find this week who needs us to act as Christ for them? Who can we find this week who needs to act as Christ for us? Who will we find? Who will you find?

*Amen.*