

Startled by selflessness

Luke 10:25-37

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We live in a world that is often characterized by selfishness. Because of this it is always refreshing when we encounter a person who is selfless. The person who is considerate, hospitable and that recognizes and meets the simplest of needs in the moment. The person who has no problem going last, yielding to others, or serving in secret. The person who truly celebrates our successes and helps us move quickly past our failures. The person who is not easily offended and has no need to win the debate. The person who is thoroughly convinced that it is better to give than to receive. The person who listens when we speak, and sits with us in the midst of our pain. The person who is familiar with laughter, contentment, sacrifice and grace. These are the people that startle us with their selflessness.

In Christ we see the same. Let us pray and seek to be made like Him as we study His Word together.

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In Luke 10 we find Jesus in a familiar situation. He was teaching a group of people. At one point a lawyer stood up and sought to test Jesus, saying, *“Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” In response Jesus asked, ‘What is written in the Law? How do you read it?’ The lawyer 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 Jesus said to him, ‘You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.’”*

But the lawyer was not content with this being the end of the answer. He sought a definition of “neighbor” that would show him to be amongst the religious faithful, those who were inheriting eternal life. So, he said to Jesus, *“Who is my neighbor?”*

In response Jesus told this story:

A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. ³¹ Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. ³² So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan, as he

journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. ³⁴ *He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him.* ³⁵ *And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, "Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back."* ³⁶ *"Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?"* ³⁷ *He said, "The one who showed him mercy." And Jesus said to him, "You go, and do likewise."*

As we read this story we must seek to understand it as the original hearers did. Jerusalem is 700 meters above sea level. The Dead Sea, which is near Jericho, is almost 400 meters below sea level. These two cities are about 30 kilometers from each other. That is about the same distance from our church to Alcalá de Henares. So, in less than 30 kilometers the elevation dropped over 1,000 meters.

The road coming down from Jerusalem to Jericho was filled with steep descents, narrow roads and sudden turns. It was great terrain for thieves and robbers. Jerome, a Christian theologian and historian from the fifth century, told how this stretch of road was so dangerous that it had become known as "The Red, or Bloody Way". If one was to attempt to travel this way it had to be done during the day and in large enough groups to discourage attack.

With this in mind, let's return to Jesus' story. *"A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead."* To Jesus' listeners this would have been unfortunate, but not uncommon. The beaten man could partially blame himself. To travel this road alone showed definite negligence on his part. No person in their right mind would have attempted that. He had been attacked, robbed and left lying on the side of the road, half-dead, incapable of saving himself.

Next Jesus told of a priest who happened to be passing that way. He saw the man and passed on the other side. He did nothing to help the man. Jesus left it to their imaginations to consider the reasons why a priest would act like this in that type of situation. It was true that if the priest touched a dead man, he would be unclean for seven days and unable to carry out his priestly duties in the Temple. It could have been a trap, and the man and others might be waiting to attack him. To get involved would be a complicated, time demanding situation that was none of his business. Whatever one might imagine as motive, the priest in the story sought to distant himself from the horrible scene of the beaten man who was desperately in need.

Jesus then added a Levite to the story. *"So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side."* The Levites were very religious as well. They were from the Jewish tribe of Levi and served as assistants to the priests in the worship of the temple. One could imagine that if one were in his situation, he might have the same excuses for not helping as the priest. Their motives are not really a part of the story, since they are merely fictional characters in Jesus' parable. Jesus is merely creating a story that will help get His point across and help His listeners apply it to their lives.

At this point in the story we now have an innocent man who has been beaten and left for dead. We have a priest who would have been considered as a person who would be closest to God. We have a

Levite who would have been considered next closest to God. And neither of them, and their supposed love for God, had resulted in an action-able love for the man in need.

Next enters the Samaritan. Samaritans were hated by the Jews and vice-vice versa. They did not talk with each other, do business with each other, or relate together in any way. It was so extreme that when Jews wanted to travel north to Galilee, instead of passing directly through Samaria, they preferred to walk all the way around it, adding days to their journey.

There was a long history of animosity between them, dating all the way back to 722 B.C. The Samaritans were a result of the intermarriage of Jews and pagans after Assyria conquered the northern tribes of Israel and brought in peoples from various parts of Assyria to live amongst them. They were considered an unclean people, far from God.

If we think in today's vernacular, in the movies, the Samaritans would always be put in the role of the bad guys or the enemy. This is what must have made the next part of the story so startling for Jesus' listeners:

"But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion.³⁴ He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him.³⁵ And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.'"

Surprisingly the Samaritan stopped to help the man in need. And He did not just give words of encouragement or call 112 as he passed by. He got involved, got his hands dirty, and began to take responsibility for the welfare of the man in need. He saw him. He had compassion on him. He went to him . . . and bound up his wounds, and lavishly poured oil and wine on them. He set him on his animal and took him to an inn. He took care of him. The next day he gave two days salary to the innkeeper with instructions to take care of the man. Some historians report that that was enough for the man to stay in the inn for two months. If more money was needed, he would pay the innkeeper back when he returned.

What was the point of the story, lavish love, at great cost, for even those who are perceived as our enemies or foes. In contrast to the Jewish priest and the Levite, the Samaritan, selflessly and extravagantly, cared for the man in need.

It must have caught the lawyer and other listeners off-guard. It was then that Jesus finished his lesson by asking a question:

"Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." And Jesus said to him, "You go, and do likewise."

That must have been a difficult admission. Go and be like the Samaritan in the story. The question had changed from "who is my neighbor?" to "will you be a neighbor?" Will you love your neighbor? The

question did not really depend on who the neighbor was, but more on if he would be a neighbor to another.

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If we are not careful, we reduce this story down to a motivational talk about being more selfless. On one level that can be gleaned from this story, but there is more here.

When we go back to the beginning of the story, when Jesus told the lawyer, “you answered correctly”, Jesus was not only responding to “love your neighbor”. Jesus was agreeing with the entire statement:

“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.”

The key part of the lawyer’s answer was the vertical, all-consuming, perfect love one was to have for God. Once this was in place, the result would be an extravagant, horizontal love for others. The vertical would result in the horizontal, and the horizontal would prove the presence of the vertical. If a person could do this, they could inherit eternal life. The only problem is that perfect love for God is impossible for us. Because of that, we cannot attain eternal life on our own. That was the problem with the lawyer’s original question, and what Jesus was trying to make clear to him and all who were listening that day.

The original question was, ***“What should I do to inherit eternal life?”*** There is nothing one can do to inherit eternal life. It is a gift from God. It can only be gained as a gift. ***“All have sinned and fallen short of the kingdom of God”*** (Romans 3:23). ***“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast”*** (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Salvation is found in realizing our complete lostness and that only through Christ can we be saved. This lawyer believed that he was good enough to earn salvation, that is why he sought to justify his righteousness by his questions. He likely fasted regularly, gave his temple offerings, observed the feasts and sabbath, gave his sacrifices, and followed the prescribed prayer formulas of the Jews. All of this could be done in the power of man, but in this moment Christ made it clear that to love God completely and his neighbors selflessly was beyond Him. Only through Christ could he inherit eternal life.

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Every day we relate with people. Whether family member or just an acquaintance, believer or non-believer, coworker or stranger, friend or enemy, we have been called to love them as Christ loved us (John 15:12; Matthew 5:44).

This is not a call for blind benevolence, or letting others take advantage of us. It is a call for a surrender and a sacrifice that comes out of a heart that is continually being filled by the love of God. It is a risk that can be taken because God is our safety net and our firm foundation. God calls us to empty ourselves as He takes full responsibility for keeping us full of what we need most.

Why do we give ourselves away? It is because of love. *“We love because He first loved us”* (1 John 4:19). *“For Christ’s love compels us . . . He died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for Him who died for them and was raised again* (2 Corinthians 5:14a; 15).

Salvation comes through Christ alone. Only then will our hearts be moved towards a greater vertical love for God, and a selfless, horizontal love of neighbor.