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## Loving Our Neighbor

Luke 10:25-37 (Good Samaritan)  
Romans 13:8-10

Tonight we heard the story of the good samaritan from the book of Luke. It is perhaps one of the most well known Bible stories, and I think it must certainly be the most well known of Jesus' parables.

So what can we still learn from this story that we have all probably heard dozens if not hundreds of times? The story results from a conversation that Jesus is having with an expert in Jewish law.

It's interesting that in Mark's and Matthew's versions of this incident, the expert asks the question, what is the most important commandment? However, in Luke, the expert asks what must I do to inherit everlasting life?

Perhaps Luke is trying to convey that the reason to keep these commandments in the first place is to inherit everlasting life. But what does it mean when we talk of everlasting life?

Now, in Luke, it's interesting that Jesus doesn't answer the expert's original question, but turns it back on him

so that the expert has to answer his own question. To which Jesus responds that he has answered correctly and that if he follows these commandments, then he will live – presumably live this everlasting life he has asked about.

Perhaps we can get a clue on the meaning of this notion of everlasting life from the book of Mark... In Mark's version, after the expert agrees with Jesus on what the greatest commandment is, Jesus tells him “you are not far from the kin-dom of God.”

It seems that what Luke is calling everlasting life, Mark is calling the kin-dom of God. And so we might equate living an everlasting life, with living in the kin-dom of God.

This idea seems to be given more credence by looking at the original Greek. Biblical scholar Marcus Borg, in his book “The Heart of Christianity,” notes that everlasting or eternal life is perhaps better translated as “the life of the age to come” and one Biblical translation (the Weymouth New Testament) actually uses the phrase the “life of the ages” instead of the more traditional “everlasting life.”

Borg also points out that the book of John talks about eternal life in the present, as if it is already here. Everlasting life isn't something we get when we die and go to heaven.

Everlasting life is the life of the age that is here now, the kin-dom of God. Perhaps a life with an eternal quality – without ends, without bounds – but a life here now, at this time.

And note that, like the term everlasting life, the kin-dom of God also does not refer to heaven or life after death. It is a vision of this world living in the presence of God, living in the Spirit of God.

The kin-dom of God is both here and now. This living in the Spirit is how each one of us are called to live as Christians now as well as in the future, forever growing in our spiritual lives as humanity itself moves closer to harmony with God.

Now, after this exchange about how to achieve the everlasting life, the boundless life in the age of the kin-dom of God, the law expert, uniquely in the book of Luke, has a follow up question: who is my neighbor? If I am supposed to love my neighbor, then perhaps I should know who exactly that is referring to.

Jesus answers this question with the well-known parable of the Good Samaritan and ends with a question of his own: which of the three passersby was the neighbor to the injured traveler? The law expert answers that it is the one who showed compassion. And Jesus instructs him to also go and show compassion.

What I get from this story is that to love our neighbor is to be a neighbor ourselves. And to be a neighbor is to show compassion.

The priest and the Levite passed the injured person by. But we shouldn't necessarily condemn them as uncaring. It would have been known by those Jesus was telling this story to that it was considered unholy for a Priest or Levite, who both worked in the temple, to touch blood or a dead body.

It would have made them unclean and unable to perform their religious duties. We can see this in the way that they actually crossed the road to avoid contact with the body.

So, I don't know that we can say they were uncaring, but clearly Jesus thinks that the priorities are mixed up when one's adherence to religious rules trumps compassion for a fellow human being.

This is certainly an aspect of this parable that the religious leaders of day might want to spend some time reflecting on.

One might even draw the inference that tending to one in need is actually more of a holy act than tending to the do's and don'ts of religion. As a commentator on this text put it, “to go into the brokenness of a person and to touch them is to go into the Holy of Holies.”

And let's look at the word compassion... compassion can be separated into its Latin roots: com, which means “with,” and pati, which means “to suffer,” thus giving compassion a meaning of “to suffer with.” To show compassion for another is to take part in their suffering. To be a healing presence for them.

Now, some Biblical translations use the word mercy instead of compassion. Marcus Borg, however, contends that the word compassion is a better translation than mercy because mercy has a connotation of wrong-doing on the part of the one who is being showed mercy and there is no such wrong-doing involved in this story.

However, we might want to keep that notion of mercy in mind. The Samaritans and Jews did not get along. They, in general, despised each other.

So perhaps mercy is also applicable – the Jews and Samaritans thought each other were wrong, just as a general principle. So, mercy applies, I think, in the sense of showing compassion to those who we perhaps don't necessarily think deserve it.

Our assessment of them may be entirely wrong. But right or wrong, we are to be a neighbor, to show compassion.

We are not only to show compassion, but we are to show compassion to all people. We are to be neighbors to and to love all people.

Not only those who are like us, but also to those we would least want to consider our neighbor. The neighbor is the “other,” those most despised or feared or different from us.

We are called to be a healing presence, to show compassion to all, and especially the “others” in our lives.

Who might this be in our world today?

This might mean people of different religions such as Muslims, who many fear in our current day, Or immigrants, especially hispanic immigrants, who many fear and label “illegal” as if they were not legitimately human.

For GLBT persons, this might mean religious fundamentalists.

We are called to be with those who are in need, whoever they may be, whatever differences we might have with them, and show compassion, to suffer with them, to be a healing presence.

If we are to inherit everlasting life, if we are to live in the eternal spirit of God, in the kingdom of God which is here and now in this place, then we are instructed to:

“Love the Most High God  
with all your heart,  
with all your soul,  
with all your strength  
and with all your mind,  
and your neighbor as yourself.”

And to love our neighbor, we must be a neighbor.  
And to be a neighbor,  
we must show compassion,  
to suffer with those in need,  
to be a healing presence to everyone  
– those like us as well as the “other.”

Love is the verb – the action in this great  
commandment. And as Paul tells us in the reading  
from Romans – Love never wrongs anyone – Love  
fulfills all of the other rules. To love, to show  
compassion, is the first and greatest law and it binds us  
all together in the kin-dom of God.

When we have compassion and when we are on the  
receiving end of compassion, "otherness" ceases and  
we experience instead our common humanity.

As Paul writes, in the body of Christ, living in the  
Spirit of God, in the kin-dom of God, there are no  
differences.

We are not Samaritan or Jew or any other race or  
nationality.

We are not woman or man or intersex or transgender.

We are not gay or lesbian or bisexual.

We are not skinny or fat or tall or short.  
We are all loved children of God –  
always deserving love,  
always capable of loving others,  
and always loved by God.

Jesus tells us that the thing that matters more than  
anything else is to love God and neighbor as yourself.  
If we go in the world, living in the love of the Spirit of  
God, showing compassion to our neighbors, to  
whomever may be in need of it, we will be living in  
the kin-dom of God.

May you all go forth with the compassion of God in  
your hearts so that you may live the everlasting life.

Amen.