Sermon: Bothering To Care
Scripture: Luke 10:25-37
Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans
Date: November 15, 2026

What a story Jesus tells! There's a reason it's one of the most well-known stories that has been told and repeated across the globe and over the centuries. The Good Samaritan. We're so deeply familiar with the story and yet the remarkable thing I find is that each time I hear it there's something new that emerges from it that I hadn't heard before.

A lawyer comes before Jesus to test him and asks Jesus "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" The theologian James Alison highlights that this is a rich little question that we tend to rush over thinking it means "how do I get into heaven" But that was not the lawyer's question. Inheriting things was something that those in power and on the inside did, not daughters, but sons, not foreigners but citizens, not peasants but landowners. So the lawyer is assuming it's an insiders thing, this inheriting of eternal life. Secondly, "eternal life" in the Jewish mind referred to the life of God in the here and now, not an afterlife in heaven. So Alison suggests we hear: "what must I do to inherit eternal life" as "what does it look like to be an insider in the life of God." What must we do in the here and now to have a deep and true encounter with the living and eternal God?

Jesus doesn't offer esoteric wisdom that comes from him exclusively as the Son of God, but simply says back to the lawyer - "well, what do our scriptures say to that question and… how do you read it?" The lawyer's response isn't simply a single rote passage from the Hebrew scriptures but rather he draws two different passages together to offer an *interpretation* of

the law of Moses. He first references Deuteronomy 6:5 - "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." Then the lawyer moves back a couple books in the Torah to Leviticus to show how he understands what that looks like to love God and he quotes verse 19:18 "'Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. So he combines those two for his answer - love the Lord your God and love your neighbor as yourself. Everyone was likely expecting Jesus to challenge his response in some way because Jesus could be quite confrontational and that was the common pursuit of truth, argumentation, but Jesus says to the Lawyer "you know what, you're right. Nicely done. Do this and you will live." Again not "do this and you will reach heaven" but rather "do this and you will live. Truly live fully in this life."

The lawyer is a little thrown by Jesus conceding the point, so he then puts this question to Jesus "Ok, but then who is my neighbor?" The question is an honest one, not necessarily the Lawyer trying to trip Jesus up this time but an honest one of how to know if you are meeting the commandments by loving your neighbor… because, the problem is that there are conflicting accounts in the law of Moses of who your neighbor is. In fact there are conflicting accounts within just a few verses of Leviticus. The portion that is quoted by the lawyer says "do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone - among your people - but love your neighbor as yourself. "Among your people" means fellow Hebrews. That's how that verse defines "neighbor". However just a few verses later comes this command - "'When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. **34** The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the LORD your God.

So which is it, the lawyer asks Jesus. Who is my neighbor? Is it those among my own people or is it also the foreigner which is the broadest interpretation of neighbor there could be. Are my neighbors my own people or basically anyone and everyone?

And that's when Jesus sets into his story of the Good Samaritan.

So there's the victim in a ditch who is not identified as a local, a Jew a foreigner, but simply a victim, and there's the priest, the Levite, and the Samaritan. The priest and the Levite as they walk by, avoid the wounded man beaten and bloodied in the ditch. Jesus doesn't say they turn up their noses or are disgusted or feel like they are better. Maybe they are distracted, like us on our phones barely conscious of what's around us? Likely their lack of response had to do with their religious positions. They were both involved in the work of the temple and tending to the duties for the people of Israel in the Holy of Holies and could not be contaminated by blood or a corpse. If they had stopped they would have had a series of involved and time-consuming ablutions to make in order to be clean again, so it was actually reasonable that they didn't stop.

Then there comes the Samaritan who immediately feels deeply moved by seeing the man in the ditch, goes to him and begins caring for him. The scandal of the story we all know is the Samaritan is the hero. But remember, the Samaritan is not a foreigner. The Jews and the Samaritans are very much related - same ancestry, same God, revealed with mostly the same scriptures, the Samaritans just refuse to see Jerusalem as the sacred center of their faith but rather Mount Gerizim. So when Jesus makes the Samaritan the hero of the story it's not because the Samaritan is a foreign enemy but because there's probably no one closer to his listeners that they struggle with more. Jesus doesn't use the distant enemy but more

maddeningly the family member who stirs us up like no one else can with the way that they are. That's Jesus' protagonist and hero in the story. He's the one who treats the victim with love and care.

Jesus ends his story and asks the lawyer, "ok, so to 'love your neighbor as yourself' in this story who then is the neighbor that I must love?" Actually Jesus' question is a little more specific than that. He says - "which of these three, the priest, the Levite, the Samaritan, is my neighbor?" We often hear this story and assume that the neighbor we must tend to is the one found in the ditch but Jesus asks which of the three men on the road is my neighbor. The victim is a given and we don't know if he's a brother or foreigner or what? The question is which of the three walking the road is my neighbor. The lawyer answers to Jesus' liking. "The one who had mercy, the Samaritan." Jesus says "go and do likewise."

So the lawyer asks "who must I see as my neighbor in order to be doing what God expects of me, for me to be an insider in the life of God?" And Jesus' answer, and here I quote from James Alison's: if you want to inherit the life of God, there is no safely circumscribed definition of who your neighbour is, there is merely finding yourself swept up into the inside of an infinitely attentive creation of neighbourliness. To love God and love your neighbor as yourself is to be wide open to how you are called by God to care. Neighborliness is created not by certain people in certain instances but is created by each of us and the people and circumstances that God places in our paths, giving us the opportunity to love God by loving the people around us who, whoever they are, in any given moment could use our attention and our care.[1]

The moral theologian James Keenan refers to this story of the Good Samaritan in his reflections on what it means to live a moral life. And he

[1] From James Alison's sermon - "Like Being Dragged Through a Bush Backwards: Hints of the Shape of Conversion's Adventure" - https://jamesalison.com/like-being-dragged-through-a-bush-backwards/

says that mercy towards others, the key to living a moral life, is “the willingness to enter into the chaos of another person’s life”. And “that for Jesus and the Gospels, sin is located not where people are weak and trying but where people are strong and not bothering.”

His definition of sin is this:

“Sin is the failure to bother to love.”

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He says we often think of sin as something we do that is wrong, but rarely if ever in the Gospel is Jesus confronting something that someone does wrong (he gives a wide breadth to those people), but rather Jesus highlights time and again when people had the capacity to respond and help and didn’t bother to. What Jesus is troubled by is not when we’ve hurt someone intentionally, yeah of course we’re not supposed to do that, but more than that, further than that the more problematic of sin is when we didn’t bother to do something we could have done. And one of the reason it’s more problematic is because we justify it in ourselves or don’t even recognize it. The dividing line of judgement around sin is where my capability or capacity meets the need in front of me and either I bother with the need or I don’t. That’s the challenge to us from the parable of the Good Samaritan. Do we bother to care?[2]

Are we willing to be interrupted by God?

The German pastor, theologian, activist in Nazi Germany, Detrich Bonhoeffer, says it this way in his book “Life Together”: “We must be ready to allow ourselves to be interrupted by God who will thwart our plans and frustrate our ways time and again even daily by sending people across our

[2] From podcast - “The Spiritual Life with James Martin, SJ” interview with Fr. James Keenan, October 6, 2026

path with their needs… if we pass them preoccupied with our own more important daily tasks… we pass by the visible sign of the cross raised in our lives to show us that God's way, and not our own, is what counts… [How] do we not manage our time ourselves but allow it to be occupied by God?"[3]

We are, all of us, the priest and the Levite at times. We do our best but are often distracted and sometimes even more intentionally move to the other side of the street or turn our head when a need is suddenly presented before us. But the call to us from deep in the Hebrew scriptures and from Jesus himself is to remember that if we want an encounter with God, if we want to be an insider in the life of God then we must be attentive to the ways maybe daily that we are invited to bother to care and note when we once again fail to bother to care. It's a reality and struggle for us all but that is the demand, the call from inside the life of God.

I invite you to notice this week in particular how God is placing before you in your daily life opportunities to bother to care. Bother to care then and see the effect it has on you, on the other. There's no claim here that it'll be a wonderful experience. It might not be. In fact that's one of the reasons we fail to bother to care because we know it'll make us late or we won't be able to do something else we had planned or it seems like it could be a rabbit hole or a black hole of need we'd fall into. But do it anyway and see. It's what it means to live within the life of God in this world, bothering to care.

And we care here in the church which is why we occasionally hold within our worship time a healing prayer time as well, a laying on of hands. Give us a reason to care and as a church let us pray with you and for you

[3] Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, "Life Together" p.p. 99-100

this morning. God is in the person in the ditch in need and God is in the hands of the one who cares. Both are needed for an encounter in the life of God. Amen.