

“Buddy, Can You Spare the Time?”
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
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Guest Minister: Rev. Don Garrett

Some stories just never go out of style. We tell and retell them over and over again. Romeo and Juliet, Three Little Pigs, Chicken Little, and Cinderella endure because they address deep psychosocial truths that people encounter in every age. The story of the Good Samaritan is another such story. Although its specifics are thoroughly embedded in the culture and issues of its times, The Good Samaritan is as timely as tonight's headlines.

It deals with the question of how and when and to whom we offer help. Sometimes people are afraid to help, worried that they might be getting involved with something dangerous. Jesus told this story to answer the question, “Who is my neighbor?” The answer is important, whether we're looking at our neighborhood or the world community. Is Iraq the neighbor we are trying to help? What about the tragic situation in Darfur?

Let's listen to the story as it is written in the book of Luke. It springs out of a discussion about the bottom line in Jewish religious teaching.

A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, “Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.”

Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.”

He was moved by pity. A Samaritan would have been an unlikely hero in those times. It would have been especially unusual to hold up a Samaritan as being virtuous when compared to a Priest or a Levite. Priests, who conducted worship in the Temple in Jerusalem, as well as Levites, who played important supporting roles in conducting worship, were normally seen as the very embodiment of religious virtue. Samaritans, on the other hand were not.

Five hundred years before this story took place, when the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem and destroyed the first Temple, Hebrew Israel was made up of a number of provinces. The Babylonians violently relocated the inhabitants of Judea (the first “Jews”) into slavery. Many Hebrews living in other provinces eluded the Babylonian captivity.

When the Jews returned to Jerusalem from Babylon, they found that those living in these outlying provinces were quite content to observe a community- and earth-based version of the Hebrew religion which the Judeans saw as inferior.

So Samaritans weren't enemies as much as they were considered immoral, inconsiderate and oblivious to their responsibilities to the Temple in Jerusalem.

It is in this context that Jesus emerges as a revolutionary religious humanist. He taught that people were more important than rules or rituals. The Priests and Levites were constrained from contact with blood or dead bodies if they were to perform their religious duties at the temple. The Samaritan, free from such concerns, was free to offer the generous help for which he is famous.

There was a lively debate at this time concerning the relevance of religion in the lives of the Jewish people. Many were disillusioned with the Priests and Temple worship as being disconnected with the real lives of the people, in which Priests and Levites were religious on behalf of the populace whose only real involvement was financial.

There was also a group called the Pharisees who wanted the people to be more ritually observant in their own lives and homes. Jesus' teachings disagreed with both the Temple and the Pharisees. He taught that ritual, Priests, Pharisees, and the Temple itself diverted attention from what should be the foundation of religious practice: Love the highest good you can imagine, and love your neighbor as yourself.

The story of the Good Samaritan illustrates this point very well: lofty religious values can keep you from doing what is really important: taking care of a victim of a crime, no matter what you think about their religion or lifestyle.

Darley and Batson conducted an experiment among seminarians at Yale Divinity School to test this hypothesis, the results of which they published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* in a 1973 paper entitled "From Jerusalem to Jericho: a study of situational and dispositional variables in helping behavior."

When subjects appeared for the experiment, they were told that they were participating in a study of the vocational careers of seminary students. After completing a questionnaire, they were asked to give a 3-5 minute talk. The task variable in the experiment was the difference in the topics upon which they were asked to speak. Some were asked to speak on the job prospects for seminary students, and others were asked to give a talk on the story of the Good Samaritan.

After giving them a few minutes to collect their thoughts, they were told that because of space limitations, they would need to deliver their talk in an office in another building. Then they gave each participant one of three variables relating to time. The first was, "Oh, you're late. They were expecting you a few minutes ago. We'd better get moving. The assistant should be waiting for you so you'd better hurry. It shouldn't take but a minute." The second was, "The assistant is ready for you, so please go right over." And

the third was, "It'll be a few minutes before they're ready for you, but you might as well head on over. If you have to wait over there, it shouldn't be long."

On the way between the two buildings, the subjects passed through an alleyway. A researcher posing as the victim was sitting slumped in a doorway, head down, eyes closed, not moving. As the subject went by, the victim coughed twice and groaned, keeping his head down.

They set up a scale of helping responses:

- 0=failed to notice victim as in need
- 1=perceived need but did not offer aid
- 2=did not stop but helped indirectly (told the aide on their arrival)
- 3=stopped and asked if victim needed help
- 4=after stopping, insisted on taking victim inside and then left him.
- 5=refused to leave victim, or insisted on taking him somewhere

After arrival at the second research site, they had the subject give the talk and then answer a helping behavior questionnaire. The results were quite interesting. The amount of "hurriedness" induced in the subject had a major effect on helping behavior, but the task variable did not (even when the talk was about the Good Samaritan).

Overall 40% offered some help to the victim. They found no correlation between "religious types" and helping behavior.

They concluded, ironically, that a person in a hurry is less likely to help people, even if that person is going to speak on the parable of the Good Samaritan. (Some literally stepped over the victim on their way to the next building!). The results seem to show that thinking about norms does not imply that one will act on them.

They speculated that ethical behavior may become a luxury as the speed of our daily lives increases. Or maybe peoples' cognition was narrowed by the hurriedness and they failed to make the immediate connection of an emergency.

Many subjects who did not stop did appear aroused and anxious when they arrived at the second site. They were in a conflict between helping the victim and meeting the needs of the experimenter.

Let's take these results back to the original story. It says that the Samaritan was moved by pity, but doesn't tell us anything about the inner life of the priest or the Levite. Based on this experiment, they might well have felt compassion but made the difficult decision to honor their prior religious commitments. I don't think Jesus was saying that they were uncaring people. He was saying that their religious obligations required them to behave in an uncaring way. Jesus' whole career was a criticism of the ritual practices of Temple Judaism. This is a story of religious and ethical humanism: people are more important than law and ritual; we need to make time for those who need our help.

We need to make time. Thinking lofty thoughts isn't enough. Even wanting to make a difference isn't enough. It takes time to live out our values and the hurried pace of modern life actively impairs our ability to help those in need. I know it has happened to me. It's not enough to mean well when we fail to do good. But it's the human condition in our society. We're encouraged to go faster and faster, to do more and more, to multi-task and over schedule ourselves. We get a lot done, but at what cost? We lose our ability to do the good that our higher values call us to do.

Who is our neighbor? The one we have the time to help. Who are Unitarian Universalists? We are religious or ethical humanists. We believe that people matter. We believe that everyone deserves our compassion. Like the seminarians in the study, though, we're often just too busy to help.

Additional psychological research has demonstrated that the major obstacle to loving our neighbors as ourselves is in the way we ascribe motives to action. When we make a mistake, we're fully aware of all the reasons that things went wrong. These are called external attributions, based on observations of intervening factors and events beyond the individual's control. The alarm didn't go off, my email dumped my messages, I swerved to avoid hitting a cat in the highway. And, sometimes, the dog really does eat the homework. But when someone else makes a mistake, we tend to make internal attributions, based on assumptions about the person's character. Like the priest and Levite were not good, caring people.

But the story and this study have shown us that it is external factors, far more than internal ones, that determine our behavior. We understand that when it comes to our own behavior, but we tend to forget it when judging the behavior of others.

A friend told me about something that happened to her. She had just finished getting cash out of a sidewalk ATM when two women approached her, asking for money. They explained that they had no money and no gas and needed to get back to Louisville. They'd asked for help at the gas station across the street, but everyone there had been mean to them. Well, they didn't look too credible to my friend. A bit disheveled, their car didn't look right. But she felt caught. She gripped her purse tightly, sighed, and gave them \$5, explaining that it was all she had. Which was not true – and this bothered my friend because she wasn't comfortable lying under any circumstance. So she watched to see what they did. The two women thanked her profusely, got back into their car, and made a U-turn right into the gas station where they carefully pumped exactly \$5 worth of gas. My friend felt guilty – they were on the level, and she could have afforded to give them enough to make it all the way home, but she didn't.

And why didn't she? Because she made the internal attribution: these women were the kind of people who would try to get money from her on false pretenses. And then it turned out that the external attribution was the right one: unforeseen conditions had left them out of gas with no way to get home. They needed compassion and understanding. And my friend finally was moved to pity, but too late. They drove off, sure to need to ask

some other stranger somewhere between Indianapolis and Louisville when they ran out of gas again.

Loving your neighbor as yourself is a countercultural activity in a society that teaches us to distrust one another. We teach each other that it is unsafe and unwise to cut others as much slack as we cut ourselves. This may be true in some situations. But at how great a cost in caring, compassion, and trust?

I invite you to ask yourself this the next time you are tempted to judge someone's actions based on the kind of person you think they are. There's the famous Native American injunction to never judge a person until you've walked a mile in their moccasins. Things always look different from the inside. That's what empathy and compassion are all about: loving your neighbor as yourself. Buddy, can you spare the time?

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the sermon preached by guest minister, The Reverend Don Garrett at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on November 26, 2006. Rev. Garrett is the minister of the Unitarian Universalist of Indianapolis.)