

## ***Re-Framing Neighbourliness for Modern Times***

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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Scripture: Luke 10:25-37

by Rev. Dave Le Grand

"...Who is my neighbour?" asks the lawyer, to which Jesus responds by telling a parable with surprise here.

I think that it's commonly known, today, that the using the Samaritan ethnicity was shorthand for a person who would have been loathed by the Jewish listeners of that parable of Jesus.<sup>1</sup> That Samaritan character took a great risk coming into contact with a Jew.

Let's not ignore, though, the very important characters of the Jewish religious leaders who ignore their own Torah call to care for the vulnerable. Not at all role models.

In their defense, contact with bodily fluid of another ritually contaminates a practising Jew – perhaps true. But I cannot imagine a modern Rabbi not stopping the car if they saw a person lying by the ditch. Make no mistake, danger is implied when Jesus says that this happened on the road to Jericho. That was dangerous territory for anybody alone, just as today, for you to stop at the scene of an accident, or to stopping along your walk to check on a person lying in a dark alleyway, or, for a nation to open its collective heart to persons who have been harmed by war... All scenarios imply a risk. Following Jesus' call to Love unconditionally implies risk.

In June of last year (2018), a visually impaired elderly gentleman fell onto a track at a subway station in Toronto. A bystander did not hesitate to jump down onto the track to help. Rather appropriate, and heartening for me, that one witness called the hero a "Good Samaritan". As the man jumped down onto the track to help the elder, two additional bystanders apparently entered the platform, saw what was going on, and went to the edge of the track to lift the injured gentleman and the heroic stranger to safety. The onlookers clapped and hugged as if they had all been a part of it.<sup>2</sup>

I should add that I became aware of this story because it went viral and appeared on my Facebook feed, along with a photo taken by a witness.

There is no doubt that bystander indifference is an unfortunate reality we share with Jesus' time. What is unique in our time, though, in this modern world, is that **the nature of our technology makes us all witnesses and potential participants in incidents.** Whether in the parable of Jesus we are indifferent or choose to take a risk and care, is largely up to us.

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<sup>1</sup> Documented by Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*. Vol. 20:125-133.

<sup>2</sup> This account of June 2018 incident can be found at <https://toronto.citynews.ca/video/2018/06/28/good-samaritan-rescues-blind-man-who-fell-onto-subway-tracks/>

The scale of the “village” we live in has grown profoundly since the Good Samaritan parable was first shared. Isn’t it an interesting question to ask today, with our modern communication tools & news items reaching our tablets and televisions instantaneously: ***Who is my neighbour in our modern times?***

The quick answer is, well, potentially anyone and people from every corner of our globe. It’s not that simple, though; technology makes us witnesses of so much that *we get information overload*.

In 2015 the world witnessed, horrified, a 6-year-old child, lying face down, washed ashore on a Turkish beach. We didn’t witness the incident, but we felt like we had. The war in Syria had been raging for 4 years, thousands of civilians killed, and little world intervention. But that image, gripped people’s hearts. It gripped mine because I had a child close to that age. We soon came to know the name of that child, Alan Kurdi, and we learned of his family’s harrowing journey, the journey made by migrants trying to find sanctuary. People cared, and federal political campaigns made “welcoming Syrian refugees” a major platform in the Canadian election. Here in Sudbury we have welcomed several families. Then this was the scene last week...

### ***Cue the video***

The Janat family arrived in Sudbury; another family among thousands who have had to flee their home in Syria because of a war that makes no sense to me.

Having said all of this, just as our ability to handle information overload causes us to change the channel, so also, I think, human compassion has a limited shelf life. I think Jesus always believed and taught that the capacity of people to love was limitless. But our compassion is limited by what ***we believe we can do***.

Sometimes we decide we can’t handle any more: Whether life gets busy, or we face economic or emotional strain, or, well you name the issue that limits our compassion.

***We stop seeing the neighbour*** – like those religious leaders in the parable of Jesus. What is modern-day analogy of “Who is my neighbour?”

You may not immediately know the family name, but you probably remember the horrifying story of the Barho family, newly welcomed to Canada. Parents and seven children were helped to move into a home in a suburb of Halifax. One night a fire destroyed the home and killed all 7 children; Abdullah (4-month-old) Rana, Hala, Ghala, Mohammed, Rola, and Ahmed (15).<sup>3</sup> The father, Ebraheim, was critically injured trying to save them and his wife, Kawthar, visits him in the I.C.U.

Kawthar was trying to catch a bus, two children in her care with her, and the bus driver ignores them because they are late - drives away. Casey Lee Martin saw the upset woman and children. She stopped to pick them up, and in the course of conversation comes to realize who she has picked up. We can be assured that there were very few people of Halifax whose hearts did not go out to Kawthar and Ebraheim.

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<sup>3</sup> Story can be found at <https://globalnews.ca/news/5470920/halifax-good-deed-goes-viral/>

The truth about that parable, as with all parables of Jesus, is that their meaning is not at all simple. It is a *good news, bad news story*, as most stories in life are. The disheartening part of it all is that the characters who *should have cared*, did nothing. The lawyer that Jesus tells this parable to seems to want an easy answer to resolve his dilemma.

On my worst days, I want the easy, straightforward path on which I will encounter the least potential complications. The Good News part of the story is God's surprise – a person coming out of seeming nowhere, who does everything, to assure that a stranger gets out of harms way. That is the part of the story we need to always remember. Life is complicated, messy. But if we take time to sift through the details of it, we will find treasure, a glimpse of God's kin-dom vision.

Like that Samaritan in a strange land that disliked him, he flagrantly disregarded the limitations he was taught and set the bar very high for what is possible when love and compassion guide us, rather than reality that our culture teaches us. In the Pride parade yesterday, one among our United Church group held up a sign that said: "LOVE WINS." Amen to that.

"Who is my neighbour?" in our modern, global village, places a great responsibility on us as Christians called to respond in love always. It is a big world. We are witness to seemingly endless problems. But I think Jesus would tell us today: See what that Samaritan did? Go and do likewise. People are doing it every day in our world – the bystander in the subway, the woman picking up a grieving Syrian mother abandoned by the bus. Let's not get bogged down by the negatives of every story... **God's Love always wins.**