

1. You know, the liability of a preacher who's gone from preaching every Sunday to just preaching occasionally is that it could be a really long morning around here. I will try to show mercy. But, it is good to be preaching in a Kentucky church again where I feel like I...speak the language. I spent years living in Phoenix and KC... I could sort of blend in, to a point. But the minute I opened my mouth people would say "Where are you from??" or [sometimes, they'd smile and do this head tilt thing] "Where are you FROM?" And I'd say, Kentucky; often having to specify that I was from a different region of Kentucky than my spouse, whose accent is not so pronounced. I'd have to get into the finer points of Kentuckiana vs. southeastern Kentucky... let me just tell you, it's hard to explain 'the holler' to folks who don't know the difference between Wild Turkey and Woodford...

Where we come from-- can give us a strong sense of identity, and community. It can also set us apart. Humans are somehow wired to put boundaries around our sense of who belongs, who is 'one of us' and who is not. The privilege of being a middle class white woman means I've rarely felt like an outsider. Though sometimes in the midwest, I did feel like I needed a translator.

But I learned from scripture how to be a guest in someone else's territory. Jesus had a system; when he was speaking to a crowd in a new place, he would start w/ story. Stories are a universal language, connecting with human places of suffering, hope and seeking... That's what we find in our scripture today.

A lawyer asks Jesus two questions that sounds really simple, but of course, are not:

*What must I do to inherit eternal life? And who is my neighbor?*

The best answer, of course, is a story.

2. "Good Samaritan" has become a blanket term for a generic do-gooder; when there's a human interest story on tv, whether someone has cleaned up a neighborhood park or rescued a cat from a tree, they are called 'a

good samaritan.’ But we cannot understate the inherent ‘bad guy’ implication that the term Samaritan actually carried in Jesus’ time... this was not at all an identity you would attach to the adjective ‘good.’ Jews and Samaritans DID NOT mix. Samaritans were very much outsiders, even the enemy.

The trouble with parables is that they are such concise, simple episodes; they are often reduced to generic stories of right and wrong, watering down much of their impact. In fact, these stories of Jesus were radical, meant to connect with people’s memories and most deeply held beliefs; and somehow transform those attachments into something new. But the versions that have trickled down to us are padded by our own culture and context, and heard through the lens of our own comforts and privileges.

that’s exactly what the lawyer in the beginning of this story does. He has a question for Jesus, but he doesn’t want a sermon; he just wants the punchline. He’s looking for the packaged answer—the illustrated tract with a 3-point salvation plan. Or at least, the Sunday school version with an easy two-word answer at the end. (That’s a lawyer, right? Just give me the closing argument! I have another meeting after this! {some of my very best friends are lawyers...i know how this goes})

In his question, he quotes from Leviticus: the word he uses for neighbor (*rea*) means friend, or fellow. In other words: a fellow Israelite—a member of his own tribe, one for whom the law requires him to care. He’s asking, *who belongs to me? Who is my responsibility?* as though there might be a boundary to his area of concern. ‘Just show me on the map, Jesus.’”

But Jesus won’t give him the two word answer. Instead, he launches into the narrative that we know as the Good Samaritan.

The people you might expect to do the right thing here-- the priest and the Levite, another kind of religious leader-- are the very ones who walk on by. In the end, the villain becomes the hero.

this dynamic turns on its head the lawyer's assumptions about what is meant by "neighbor." And what to expect of people that tradition has taught him to fear.

This story does not just teach a lesson; it rejects the very premise of the question. In other words--the lawyer gets lawyered. By Jesus. And further, Jesus doesn't just answer the question. He ends with a directive; an important follow-up assignment. "Go and do likewise."

I am lucky enough, in my role, to catch a glimpse of how our wider Church lives into this directive to "go and do;" to show mercy-- not just to those within the boundary lines of our tribe or territory.

I know when most folks hear "Week of Compassion," the first thing you think of is disaster response; and that is certainly a big part of our work. But we are also the denomination's fund for development work, and for refugee and immigration ministry. 75 years ago, this ministry emerged out of the humanitarian crisis created by WW2. The church felt called to respond to the suffering of those displaced by the trauma of war; and our mission evolved from there. Nowadays, we say that we have '3 areas of response,' but it's not like disaster work, development projects and refugee ministry are totally different neighborhoods. Often, one is deeply connected to the other. And often, that work is not other places. It starts in our own backyard; and the circle ripples outward from there.

Right here at *Beargrass*, for instance, there's a team meeting today, making plans to help a new family of refugees settle in Louisville. This is not the first time this church has sponsored a family; there's actually a story about Beargrass on the website of our partners, Disciple Refugee and Immigration Ministries. In helping families find employment and empowerment; in providing bicycles so they will have transportation; in showing welcome and the hope of a new life-- you've become leaders in our wider church; providing examples of what it means to 'go and do likewise;' to show mercy to those who might not be recognized as 'neighbors' by all in our community.

Meanwhile, down at the *Southern Border*: those from neighboring countries try to find new life here and are often met with cruelty and terrible suffering. Immigration is a vastly complex issue, and no party line has the answers to fixing it. But our faith calls us to meet the stranger with mercy; and not ask too many questions about the semantics of 'who belongs to me, and 'who is mine to care for?' Through Week of Compassion, you support a Disciples mission site in Texas called--wait for it-- *Southwest Good Samaritan Ministries*. The folks there work to meet basic needs like housing, water, and food; while also providing advocacy and legal aid, and generally humanizing the process of becoming neighbors this side of the border.

Because this issue is so complex, we approach it from many angles; in addition to providing humanitarian relief at the border, we also take proactive measures, addressing the roots of the crisis in Central America.

Just a few months ago, I was able to travel to *Honduras* and visit one of our global development projects there. I went to family farms that are just beginning the program--learning to install latrines and hand-washing stations to improve sanitation and reduce the spread of disease; and I got to see farms in later stages, where families have learned to plant new crops and are enjoying the fruits of their labor.

Those that have completed the years-long process get a wonderful graduation gift: a cow. We've found that when a single family gets a cow, nutrition among that village's children improves immediately; milk is introduced into the diets of not just the one family, but the whole community. And the understanding is that, when the cow has a calf, it will be gifted to another family. Not a family living right next door, but one in a neighboring village. This practice keeps the livestock gene pool pure; but it also passes the wealth on down the road, so that the next community begins to thrive.

Programs like this one create opportunity; more families are empowered to provide for their own needs; more can send their children to school. Fewer young adults make the dangerous journey north; families stay together, and we begin to scratch the surface of the border crisis.

*And who is my neighbor?* The one who showed mercy. Maybe -the one who gives you a cow.

4. The work of Week of Compassion is the work of the whole church; wherever we are, you are. Here on this corner, in this neighborhood; and also out there. What's clear is that the Church right now--both here and far beyond these walls-- this body of Christ is uniquely situated to respond to the particular challenges of our time.

In the face of overwhelming need, it might be tempting to ask, "who is my neighbor?" Maybe that is the 'lawyer' in us: the pragmatist; the voice of place and privilege...We ask 'who belongs to me,' or 'who is my responsibility,' as though we might be able to put boundary lines around our compassion; as though geographical proximity is what makes someone our neighbor, and not the state of being a fellow human being; in need of care.

But Jesus shows us, again and again, that question is the way of death. We are called instead to a fullness of life; not the way of two word easy answers... but of richly layered story; and a lived experience of compassion that cannot be reduced to a sound bite.

5. One of my favorite bands, the Head and the Heart (sadly NOT performing at Forecastle this year); has a new song... it goes: "I Found Out, it's not the love that's in your mind; it's the love that we might find/thats gonna save our lives."

*What must we do to inherit eternal life?* It's simple, really. It's love that's gonna save our lives.

The lawyer wants a one-word answer; but the more complicated response to his question is this: The work of eternal life is *actually eternal*. it is a lifetime of following in the way of Jesus, not just reciting a few parsed words of his teaching. It is the way of everyday mercy. It is a call to widen the boundaries of who belongs to us, and whose neighbor we choose to be. Whether we welcome refugees to our own neighborhood; or show

compassion to those at the border; or make life more sustainable half a world away-- the way of mercy points to the way of life.

What must I do to be saved? -Go, and do likewise to your neighbor.

And who is my neighbor? Friends... who isn't?