

Where You Least Expect It
Luke 10:25-37
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Have you ever noticed that God shows up where you least expect it? In the middle of a void, God shows up and creates the universe including this planet we call home. God shows up and tells Noah to build a giant boat. God shows up to a 70-year-old Abraham and tells him to move. Jacob is facing a showdown with his brother and God shows up and wrestles with him all night. God shows up in a burning bush to talk to Moses. God shows up in the middle of the night to talk to young Samuel. God shows up in the silence to confront Elijah.

God shows up in a manger on a Bethlehem night. God shows up as Jesus is being baptized and shows up on a mountaintop where Jesus had gone to pray with Peter, James, and John. Moses and Elijah show up there, too. God shows up on a hillside with five loaves and two fish to feed the five thousand. God shows up on the third day in a tomb outside of Jerusalem to break death once and for all. God shows up as Saul was making his ways to Damascus to take name of those following a dead prophet named Jesus.

And yet, most of us go through our ordinary days not expecting to encounter something holy, don't we? We do pray for God to show when we need something but if we were to be honest, if we have had the privilege of encountering God, we have usually found God in the unexpected. Earlier in Chapter Ten of the gospel of Luke, Jesus had sent the disciples out two by two to find God in unexpected ways. They were not to prepare for their journey. They were not to take extra clothes, or extra provisions, or even a spare set of sandals.

He sent them to assigned regions for a designated period of time and now they were returning with stories that they themselves could not believe. They preached in unexpected places and God showed up. They healed in unexpected places and God showed up. When it was time, they all returned to Capernaum where they shared stories in amazement.

It was in the middle of everyone talking at once that someone stood up to ask Jesus a question. Hmm? That is unexpected. No, it wasn't God, it was a lawyer – one of those guys that studies the Torah fulltime. And he asked a question that just about everyone who has ever lived wants to ask – “What do I have to do to gain eternal life?” It wasn't the first time someone had asked that question but Jesus always tailored his answer to the one asking the question. So Jesus decided just to knock it back to the lawyer who should know the answer already. Jesus said, “What does the Torah say and how do you interpret it?”

Ahh, the lawyer had a chance to show out. *"You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself."*

Jesus nods, "You are correct. Do this and you will live." Wait! That is not exactly what the young man had asked. He wanted to know how to live forever and Jesus seemed to imply if you follow these laws now, you will really come alive here and now. Jesus did not seem to be implying something for eternity. Did the lawyer notice the intentional wording? Of course, he did. That is what lawyers do.

The lawyer acknowledged that the shrewd answer Jesus had given had definitely won round one for team Jesus. Now, if it were me, I would have said thank you and walked away but you know lawyers. This lawyer wants to justify himself. Another costly error. Friends, we cannot justify ourselves and if we are seeking to justify ourselves, we have lost the argument already. When it comes to God's law, God is the only one **(the only one)** who can justify us. Period. And if God chooses to justify us, it is a gift of grace. Sigh. We are not justified because we are right. We are justified because God says we are justified. But, that is a whole other sermon. Our young lawyer has not figured out this wisdom yet so he impulsively asks another question. "Who is my neighbor?"

Here is where our Bible translators leave something out. It is a word that means, "on this point." Jesus specifically wants to address the neighbor issue. Who is our neighbor? Is it the family next door or across the street? If they move, do they cease to be my neighbor? Has the lawyer hit on some technicality that requires further interpretation?

How will Jesus respond? As you might expect, Jesus tells a story. He starts out by telling us a man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. First, his listeners would immediately understand that to go from Jerusalem to anywhere, you traveled down so he has them interested. Then Jesus tells us nothing about this traveler. It could have been anyone and that was his point. Everyone could relate to a man traveling to Jericho who is attacked by robbers, even our lawyer. The man is beaten, stripped of everything (including his clothing) and left to die on the side of the road. That was a real fear for those traveling alone. Jesus had just sent his disciples out by pairs – not alone. Someone traveling alone is vulnerable and they had all probably done it at some point and they remember the fear. Immediately, Jesus has their attention and has them relating to the victim. He has them wondering who will help them or will they be left to die.

First, a priest comes by. Ahh, the crowd is thinking, he will certainly help the man. No, he sees the man but crosses to the other side of the road. Now before you start thinking the priest was concerned with ritual purity, know this. Priests have a directive to save lives, no matter what. This priest just did not want to be bothered. He did not want to get involved. Then a Levite passed by and he, too, crossed to the other side and went on his way. These were men of God. They knew the law. They knew they were required to help but they did not want to get involved. No one would know. No one is around. No one will know.

Okay, so now we will have a third person. Now many stories we are familiar with have three potential advocates. The three bears, the three pigs, three men walked into a bar. Jews hearing this story would expect a priest, a Levite, and an Israelite but that is not the pattern here. Jesus discards what might be a Jewish hero with someone unexpected and someone very unwanted. It is a priest, a Levite, and a Samaritan. Thomas Long says it would be like saying a priest, a Levite, and Osama Bin Laden. No, not a Samaritan!

I will not go into all the historical details, but Jews and Samaritans were bitter enemies in the first century. We might refer to this story as the Good Samaritan but for a Jew, there was no such thing as a “good” Samaritan. When Jesus was telling this story and mentioned a Samaritan, every one would be horrified and know beyond a shadow of a doubt that something bad was going to happen because Samaritans were bad to the bone. So imagine their surprise when the Samaritan saw the wounded man and was moved with compassion. But he did not just feel compassion, he acted. He did something that actually saved the man’s life. At great personal risk to himself, he dressed the man’s wounds, took him to the nearest inn, and paid for him to be cared for, fed, and looked after. The Samaritan promised to return and repay the innkeeper for any out of pocket expenses.

The Samaritans had the same obligations to obey the Torah as the Jews did. Those laws seemed to mean nothing to the two Jewish leaders who should have known better. They could not be bothered to love their neighbor as themselves. It was the Samaritan who fulfilled the law. It was the Samaritan who showed mercy. It was the Samaritan who saved the man’s life.

So now Jesus asked the question, “Which of these three was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” The lawyer could not bring himself to say the word “Samaritan,” so he answered – “The one who showed him mercy.”

So why did Jesus tell the story this way and why did Luke choose to retell it? Some might say that Jesus is making a point and giving the lawyer an example, and Luke is telling this parable to give us a example of what a devoted follower of Jesus would do. No, I do not think so. If Jesus was trying to inspire us, he would have used a good Jew coming to the rescue, not an enemy. We are far more inspired when it is someone in our circle that does a good deed. If we told this story we would use someone we could relate to to be our hero or heroine. We are not, especially in this day and age, interested in the good deeds of someone we consider “the enemy, or the other.”

No, in the twenty first century, we believe in Euclidean geometry where parallel lines run beside one another and never touch. We have drawn lines in all kinds of cultural issues, and we have definitely drawn lines in political issues. We have forgotten the days when people of different opinions worked together for a mutually beneficial outcome. Jesus intentionally chose for the enemy to be the hero in this story because the whole point of loving as Jesus loves is to love your enemy. We are called to pray for our enemy, to

love our enemy, to seek the welfare of our enemy, and to care for the needs of our enemy.

God shows up in the parable as the despised Samaritan who has compassion for his enemy and cares for him like he is his best friend. Jesus told this story intentionally to the lawyer and Luke retells it intentionally for us. We are not allowed to live in a parallel universe away from people we dislike. We are not allowed to live in a parallel universe from those with whom we disagree. We are not allowed to live in a parallel universe from those who vote differently than we do. We are not allowed to live in a parallel universe from those who have a lifestyle we do not like.

Jesus called for us to love our enemies. To pray for our enemies. To show grace to our enemies. Jesus asks us to forgive, to show mercy, and to be understanding. This is the central message of the gospel of Luke with is the gospel of the outsiders.

Early in my ministry, I pastored a church with a large population of World War 2 veterans. Some had been fighter pilots, some had been on ships in the Pacific, while others served in the infantry. One of the best storytellers among the group was nicknamed Whit. By the time I arrived as their pastor, most where in their late seventies up to their mid-eighties. Whit came home from the war and he and his wife opened a shoe store in Little Rock. Whit was a popular guy with many, many friends who loved to stop by for a cup of coffee or to buy a pair of shoes.

Now some of Whit's friends did not like each other very much and when one of the them would come in the store complaining about the other, whit would stop them immediately. He would remind his friend that he was a friend but he would also remind him that the other fella was his friend as well. He would make a deal with him. He would not allow that friend to talk about the man he did not like nor would he allow the other man to talk about him. Whit told me that he hoped they would eventually learn to get along. And they often did.

Whit saw this as he way of being a good neighbor. This was how he practiced his faith. He said God did not give him the option to dislike folks.

There are many ways to be a good neighbor. We try to be a good neighbor in this community by treating those we serve with dignity and respect. How many of our volunteers have given someone a ride to home or to the grocery store. Erin regularly checks the county arrest reports to see if our neighbors got in trouble. The other day I had lunch with the new pastor at Fairview and he put it this way, it is better to be curious than to judge.

The Samaritan was compassionate and curious and generous. He was the neighbor a stranger needed. And Jesus said, "Go and do the same."