

Chance Encounter

Deuteronomy 30:9-14; Luke 10:25-37

Rev. Dr. Jill Duffield

First Presbyterian Church
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Unexpected. Physical. Messy. Demanding. Inconvenient. These are words that describe the parable of the half-dead, anonymous person in the ditch. This story is so familiar to us that we forget how utterly shocking it is. Scattered throughout this harrowing tale are words found only here in all of the New Testament:

Half-dead

Coincidence

Journeying

Bind up

Trauma

Pour over

Inn

Innkeeper

Spend extra

All of these words unique to this parable.

One word in this story is found only twice in all the New Testament:

Return

A few only three times:

Fall upon

And

Take care of (two of the three times are in this story)

So, what is going on here with all these rare words in this familiar parable?

It seems the writer of Luke's gospel is being very deliberate about what is required to be a neighbor, very clear about what it entails to love the Lord our God and our neighbors as ourselves, very specific about what it takes to inherit eternal life. And the words chosen are gritty, evocative, shocking, maybe even offensive, enough to make the hearer want to turn away like the priest and the Levite. Jesus makes clear that the kind of love he is talking about is embodied and demanding, incarnate and sacrificial. Not just thoughts and prayers, platitudes, or righteous posturing, but hands on, costly care.

The neighbor to that nameless, unlucky, man is the person who allows their planned journey to be derailed for the sake of anyone in need. The neighbor is the one who gets close, so close he touches the trauma, tends to the wound, finds a place for the injured to heal, spends extra to secure a safe space, enlist others, and even returns to make sure the half-dead man has been brought back to life.

The story may well be familiar, but the living of it is all too out of the ordinary, and for good reasons.

The priest and the Levite aren't bad people, they are, more often than not, us. They are, as Fred Craddock puts it, choosing "between duty and duty." They have legitimate responsibilities to perform, ones that will be thwarted if they stop and help. They will be rendered unclean, unable to do the jobs they are tasked with doing. People are counting on them. People they already know and are accountable for need them. They aren't callous or uncaring, they are pressed with real demands. Perhaps they were afraid it was a trap on this dangerous road from Jericho to Jerusalem, a scam that would leave them unable to tend to the ones they are on their way to see. Haven't you made these same sort of calculations when you've seen someone in need? I know I have.

Jesus' point, in part, is that even priests and Levites, those we assume to be the ones to offer care, don't always stop to help we are not to relegate that role to the experts or the likely suspects. True neighbors are everywhere, often unexpected and found among all kinds of people. There are no requirements, social, political, cultural, professional, religious or otherwise to being a neighbor, only the willingness to respond to anyone, at any time, with tangible care. Even a Samaritan who is, as one scholar puts it, "Ceremonially unclean, socially outcast and religiously a heretic" can fulfill God's greatest commandment and inherit eternal life.

Anyone could be our neighbor, and anyone can be a neighbor. Chance brings us together, tending to one another creates community.

Fulfilling God's commandment is all-too-near to us. Closer than we think, closer than we'd like. And while it is certainly demanding, through Christ it is more than possible.

Every day, in any chance encounter we're given the opportunity to embody the gospel, to be the hands and feet of Christ, to love God and neighbor. In every chance encounter we can ask: What wounds need to be bandaged? What hurts need anointing? What extra am I called to give for the sake of another's healing?

We may be surprised by what we notice, but who we see, how we respond and the transformation that happens as a result.

An essay written by nurse Tim Cunningham, published in “intima” a journal of narrative medicine recounts an encounter that reveals what it means to show mercy to those left half-dead in the ditch.

Cunningham was working with Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. He shares an encounter with Abdul, a seventeen-year-old who had survived the genocide in Myanmar only to be stricken with an illness that was decimating his young body. Cunningham writes:

Abdul spoke limited English and we, no Rohingya. We relied on our interpreter, Nawshad. When asked about pain Abdul said, “Everywhere.” When asked about his family, he smiled, “They are well.” When asked about his home, his response was gratitude. He lived with his family in a box of bamboo—poles and thin crosspieces upon which an orange tarpaulin was strewn.

“Now we are safe,” said Abdul.

Abdul told us he had lost his appetite three days ago. He said he did not miss dahl and rice, mangos, and bananas, though he knew that he should. He had not drunk for a day. I unwrapped an IV cannula and Abdul jumped. ...

Abdul’s fear-cracked groan shook the bed, and his left hand made a fist as I sought a vein. The needle was in a void; there was no flash of blood in the cannula’s chamber. *Pause. Let the vessel de-constrict. Let him relax. Let me relax.* Nothing. I moved the needle; Abdul wailed. Nawshad whispered into my ear, “No blood.” Abdul’s eyes irrigated the borrowed t-shirt that he used for a pillow. I told him that I would try again. He whimpered but nodded with soft affirmation. Second stick. Nothing. Abdul arched his back off the mat.

He looked at me and sniffled, “Vicious.”

Saliva stretched from the bottom of his paan-stained teeth to his splintered lower lip. ...a second time, uttered, “Vicious.” A third and fourth time with swollen vehemence, “Vicious, vicious!”

Nawshad kept calm and held Abdul’s hand while I stretched the tired tourniquet. Abdul yelled, “Vicious!” as the 20-gauge needle ripped open his forearm to find a home in a thirsty vein.

“We’re done,” I said and secured the line. I put my hand on Abdul’s shoulder, “I’m sorry I hurt you.”

Nawshad leaned in behind me and said, “He’s fine.”

Abdul whispered, “Vicious.” ...

Two liters of fluid in, and Abdul looked less pale. His heart rate had decreased from 150 to 120. Slower was better but not good enough. We called to transfer him to another clinic that could rehydrate him overnight. ...

We called for an ambulance, rather a van with a gurney. It had a rusted oxygen tank tied to the back of the driver's seat with twine. ...Abdul said he could walk the few paces from the clinic to the ambulance. He took five on his own and then he leaned heavily on his brother and me. The entirety of his bones and youth was in our hands for the last step as we lifted him onto the stained gurney. I put my hand on Abdul's hand. He laid his hand across his abdomen.

One last time he said, "Vicious."

Nawshad closed the door to the ambulance.

"He really liked you," said Nawshad with careless confidence. "All day long he sent you wishes."

Fred Craddock says Jesus' parable "offers an example of acting in love which is without preference or partiality, and which expects nothing in return." Tim Cunningham went around the world to share this kind of love, but we don't have to because, we are all called to see everyone's humanity everywhere we go, in every chance encounter. Our neighbors are everywhere, anywhere someone is hurting and in need of care. A neighbor is anyone not living the abundant life Jesus came to give. They are as close as in the pew behind you, at your dinner table or even in the mirror. Some suffering all too visible, so evident we need to cross to the other side of the street if we want to avoid it or go around the world to tend to it, but some trauma is hidden and very hard see, yet nonetheless debilitating and in need of care. In our current context, we would be safe to assume that we all need compassion, tenderness, kindness and mercy, we need people to check on us, and give a little extra patience or time or attention, those who pour out their love like God does: without preference, partiality or an expectation of anything in return.

This is what it means to be neighbors. To bind up the wounds of whoever is in the ditch with whatever means we have to bring healing. To pour out the oil of gladness in a world fraught with pain. To make sure our determination to get to where we are going does not blind us to others on the journey with us. To cultivate a community of caring. To remember that it is often in what we imagine to be vicious spaces that life-changing wishes are given when we are willing to get near enough to receive them, near enough for chance encounters to make us neighbors on earth even before we are united in heaven. God's commandment so close and not too hard for us when the living Word on our mouths and in our hearts is embodied in all we say and all we do no matter where we are or who we meet. Everywhere. Anywhere. Always. Neighbors.