

“The Biggest Littlest Things You Do”
Believe, Week 8, Compassion: Luke 10: 27-35
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So...thanksgiving is this week! In my house Thanksgiving is all about family, food and football...and not necessarily in that order. And people across the country are getting ready to travel—en masse—for Thanksgiving suppers. If your plans for Thanksgiving involve driving, flying, or taking a train, you're not alone...there will be an estimated 78 million of us on planes in trains and automobiles. It's commonly known as the busiest travel day of the year followed by the busiest shopping day of the year. In fact the National Retail Federation expects consumers will spend \$655.8 billion this holiday season on stuff.

I will not be shopping on Black Friday! If you do chose to enter that commercialized chaos you won't do this, or this, or this! (Images of abandoned shopping carts)

I believe I warned you this might be coming when I last gave the message a few months ago. I am a stickler when it comes to shopping cart etiquette. Some of you may remember my passionate plea about this from a few years ago. If so, bear with me. And for those who don't, well, which type of shopper are you – a cart returner or cart shover? I am the former. If you are the latter I have a favor to ask: Will you please knock it off?!

Oh, I know, you're busy. (Me too.) And you're in a hurry. (Ditto). But does ditching the cart really save you time? Certainly not if you exert the enormous extra effort of wrenching the cart over the curb so it doesn't roll unattended around the lot scraping car doors. It's an oddly thoughtful gesture but couldn't you have used all the extra effort just to zip the cart back to where it belongs? Perhaps you don't realize that me, or whoever is coming behind you could spend twice that time and effort wrestling the cart off the curb so we can pull our cars into the parking spot. Perhaps you don't care.

Ah ha! Perhaps it's not what you intend, but can I suggest that leaving wayward carts in your wake implies you don't really care about anybody else's time or inconvenience or feelings.

So, I propose an additional commandment to God's top 10: Thou Shalt Not Ditch Your Shopping Cart!

I think Jesus felt pretty strongly about this too – not shopping carts obviously but treating others how we wish to be treated ourselves. So much so he stated it as the second most important commandment and it is his response to the question about how to have eternal life.

This is week 8 of our Believe series and we're talking about compassion. The key idea is: I believe God calls all Christians to show compassion to people in need but I don't think that's

enough. I believe God calls us to show compassion to all people – period. So that's how shopping cart etiquette, perhaps what you are thinking is a ridiculous biblical analogy, relates to compassion. While it may be a little thing to put your cart back where it belongs, I assert it is a gigantic gesture. In fact the littlest things we do can often make the biggest difference to someone else - maybe just their day...or maybe their life.

That's what Jesus illustrates in his parable of the Good Samaritan. This scripture passage finds Jesus being challenged by a legal expert or lawyer. Jesus has been stirring up the establishment with his own ridiculous biblical analogies: you can heal on the Sabbath?! Eat with tax collectors and sinners?! Welcome back a wayward son!?

First century lawyers were also known as scribes or doctors of the law. Their job was to interpret and try to make sense of the many laws passed down to them over the centuries – the 10 commandments plus about a million more. They discussed these in what might be called one of the first growth groups – where they debated issues and wrestled with what was the truth. And this lawyer is up for a debate – what lawyer isn't - so he confronts Jesus with a frequently discussed question: "Rabbi, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus turns the conversation around and in good Jewish fashion answers the lawyer's question with a question: "You are a legal expert," He replied, "What is written in the law?"

The lawyer answered Jesus with a formula he has heard Jesus teach before, a simple summary that other rabbis accepted. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind," he quoted, "and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

"You are correct," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."

Now, the loving God part is all well and good, I imagine the lawyer is thinking. But who is this "neighbor" you claim I am supposed to love? He asks for some clarification, some specifics. Scripture tells us he wants to justify himself and he's probably hoping Jesus will answer: "Your relatives, your friends, fellow Jews." The people you know. People you love. Your inner circle.

Instead Jesus does what we know him so well for: he tells a story designed to shock and awe. The parable of the Good Samaritan is one of the most well-known parables in the Bible. It's the basis of statutes in the U.S. and Canada called Good Samaritan laws to protect bystanders from helping someone injured without worrying about legal repercussions. Today the word Samaritan itself conjures up positive images. To be a Samaritan to someone else is a good thing.

Not in Jesus' day. To understand just how shocking this story is we need to know a little something about the culture then and why the listeners would have very different opinions about the cast of characters in this story and their actions.

"A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead." ³¹

This road is indeed a dangerous road, well known for being infested with robbers and thieves and a lone traveler would have been an easy target. But because Jesus does not suggest the man as being any other race his listeners would assume the traveler to be Jewish. In addition he was stripped of clothes, which was a primary way of identifying people. And because he's "half-dead" which we interpret as unresponsive he cannot verbally identify himself.

"A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side."³²

The first to arrive is a priest who immediately steers his mount across the road to pass on the other side. Doesn't even get within six feet of him because if he had he would have become "unclean" and been subject to a humiliating purification ritual as well as a loss of income for a period of time – an unclean priest can't perform and therefore be paid for priestly duties. He uses all these reasons to justify ignoring this man as his neighbor.

"So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side."³³

The second to arrive is the Levite. Levites also were religious leaders who served at the temple but were lower in stature and wealth. It's likely he witnessed the priest trot his ride on by the injured man and it's also likely the Levite is on foot. He too would be made unclean if he touched the body but his purification was less rigorous. Still, it would be an annoyance. It could put him at risk. It would be much easier for the Levite to just leave him be.

"But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him."³⁴

So the last to pass by is the Samaritan. Since we have the fore knowledge to know that the Samaritan was the hero of the story we have to temporarily put ourselves in the mindset of Jesus's audience. They would have been shocked and horrified that a dirty, half-breed, temple-defiling Samaritan – hated by the Jews – would be the one Jesus would use as his Gordon Good Guy. Jesus tells us the Samaritan took pity on the injured man – pity being defined as a feeling of sorrow and compassion caused by the suffering and misfortunes of others. The word compassion has at its roots the word "innards" or what we more commonly refer to as "guts"...the Samaritan had a deep, gut-level reaction to the injured man...even though the injured man could very well hate the Samaritan's guts.

So the Samaritan stops to check on the man, a little thing in and of itself but part of a gigantic gesture.

"He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him."³⁵ The next day he took out two denarii^[c] and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'

He not only stops, he goes out of his way, above and beyond, risking his life really, to do what the Priest and the Levite would not. He provides first-aid, transports him to the inn, pays for the injured man to stay there and recover and promises to return and pay any debt he incurs as he recovers.

The story is so insulting that when Jesus asks the lawyer:

³⁶“Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man, he cannot bear to even say the word “Samaritan” instead: ³⁷ “The one who had mercy on him.”

Last week we talked about humanity and the human condition of sin. In the wake of the election we got an additional big fat dose of bad behavior. I ran in to a friend this past week who I hadn't seen for a while and as we caught up she told me she had worked for one of the political parties canvassing neighborhoods. She told me she was spit on, cursed at and chased by a man with a rake...all in the neighborhoods surrounding my home. The behavior we witnessed was shocking, but as Greg Penza so eloquently shared in his message last week, it lurks just beneath the surface in all of us...sin.

This week we are looking at a different kind of sin. No less insidious. The sin of indifference, the sin of inaction, the sin of irresponsibility.

What the Samaritan did for that injured Jewish man didn't really make sense: why would he show compassion to someone who hated him, risk his own life, and spend his own money for no acknowledgement or reward. Why?

He made the choice to do something. Something unselfish, something risky, something that reflected God's love for him onto someone else.

The Priest and the Levite chose indifference. Why? Well, the Priest had already been serving God at the Temple all week and he was off-duty- anxious to get home. Maybe the robbers were still lurking somewhere on the road using the injured man as bait for another victim. It was a busy road...someone else would be coming along soon...let them take care of this man. The Priest left it to the Levite who did exactly what the Priest did...nothing. They both knew the man was gravely injured and in need of help and yet they chose not to get involved – too busy, too messy, too risky.

Many years ago my family was on a camping trip. We had a pop-up camper and on this particular trip we were at a campground near Rehoboth Beach, Delaware. Now campers at public campgrounds are a mix of Priests, Levites and Samaritans. Unfortunately on this trip I behaved like the former. I watched and listened inside the darkness of my camper as a woman at the next campsite over was berated and belittled by an abusive partner, I assumed but don't know for sure was her husband. I knew she was in trouble and I knew she needed help but I was afraid, she was just sitting there taking it from him, who am I to interfere? And I didn't want my husband interfering either. We chose not to get involved. Eventually someone else must have reported this man as an official from the campground

came by and things quieted down. What bothers me to this day is not so much that we didn't step in and confront the man but that when I saw the women in the restroom the next morning...looking exhausted, miserable, beaten down, I said nothing. I couldn't save her marriage, I couldn't rescue her from the abuse, but I could have shown compassion. I could have said something, yet I was ashamed to say I passed her by as I walked out of that restroom, back to my campsite and packed up my camper to go home.

At the conclusion of the parable Jesus has answered the lawyer's question but it's not the answer he expected or hoped for because Jesus has twisted his question around and instead of defining who is and is not a neighbor, he tells the lawyer go and be a neighbor to everyone.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan elicits a range of emotions doesn't it? And it makes us feel uncomfortable. Not just because it affirms the reality of sin. But because it affirms the reality of our duty to love others. I originally shared my passion for shopping cart etiquette 9 years ago...and still to this day I will have someone tell me that if they are in a parking lot and debating what to do with their cart they think of me and feel guilty...and dutifully wheel it back. Please, please, please, don't do it out of guilt. Jesus didn't step off his throne and travel the road from heaven to earth, he didn't travel alongside us and experience all our human emotions and physical pain, he didn't travel that very same road from Jericho to Jerusalem on his way to the cross to make us feel guilty. The law says to love your neighbor as yourself. If we, as Christians, have experienced the love of God through Jesus Christ, then the love of God should flow through all our actions, all of our actions however small. Because when it comes to sharing God's love with others it's better to start small than not at all.

The Apostle Paul sums it up beautifully: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows." 2 Corinthians 1:3-5

A glass of water is a little thing. It is easy to take for granted. It flows into our homes in about 15 different ways, sinks, tubs, toilets, washers, hoses. We never have to consider how we will get it. Not so in Africa. Water is the most precious commodity. Women spend sometimes 40% of their time carrying water back to their villages. It may not be fit to drink but they have no choice. Children often don't go to school because they are needed to carry water. Once when we had a water main break at my house and we were without water for about 10 hours my children didn't want to go school because they couldn't shower.

Will you take out that small offering envelope called The Promise of Christmas? This advent season let's show compassion for our neighbors in Mozambique who don't have

access to clean water. Your donations, no matter what size, can collectively bring fresh water to a village there by funding a bore hole for a well. Your offering will show compassion to homeless families in Bucks County through Family Promise and kids and teens in need in Trenton being helped through Urban Promise. You don't have to do it today. In fact, we encourage you to take some time to pray about it. Maybe around your Thanksgiving table.

But also consider other ways you can let your love flow to others in the coming weeks. Woodside is hosting Family Promise this week. Can you volunteer an hour or two of your time or perhaps overnight? Can you help a child with his homework afterschool? Urban Promise would appreciate your help. Small things but all gigantic gestures.

How will you show compassion to your neighbor? Will you be a Priest? A Levite? A Samaritan?

In this case, I'd rather be the latter.

Resources Used:

He Chose the Nails, Max Lucado

Luke For Everyone, N.T. Wright

Poet and Pleasant and Through Peasant Eyes, Kenneth E. Bailey

The Bible Exposition Commentary, Warren W. Wiersbe