

“Will We Notice, Listen and Engage?”

Friends, longtime and new, we are now and we are here. The Spirit has gathered us now – on this sixth Sunday in the long green, growing season of ordinary time in the circle of our Christian church year. And the Spirit has gathered us here – with this beautiful, welcoming friend we call People’s Park. Our faith in a God that is fathomless love calls us to a central purpose in our lives – to embody and practice love. This morning, we will wonder together about how open and ready we are to notice, listen and engage in the work of loving one another. Will you approach your neighbor - the other - in your life? Will we each do so with courage and humility? I invite you to please pray with me now, closing your eyes if you wish.

God of Abraham, God of Jesus and of the people with whom he intersected, God of Martha and of her sister Mary, God within each of us and connecting all that is; stir our spirits and our intellects this morning, nudging us to wonder how open and ready we are for the work of embodying your love. And as you expand the space in our spirits and intellects, O God, grant us the serenity to accept the things that are not within our power to change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen.

The majority of our gospel reading for today was actually shared last week in many Christian communities around the world. Jesus’s conversation with an expert on the Law (or Torah, the core Hebrew scriptures) and the parable he weaves about a Samaritan encountering a Jew on the road between Jerusalem and Jericho is all assigned to last week (the fifth Sunday in ordinary time) every third year in the lectionary cycle. However, from among all of Jesus’ parables, this one has had the most impact on my life.

Given that we had a special stand-alone message and readings last Sunday; I decided that, today, we could hear both this parable and the account of Jesus' visit with Martha and Mary.

The parable encourages several questions about enacted love. Why did it matter that the risk-taker was a Samaritan? How was the Samaritan moved to extend care to a stranger? And finally, when have I last taken a risk in order to relate with another... or, when have I last noticed another taking a risk in order to relate with me?

I feel power and possibility through the story's focus on the spiritual practice of approach. Let's allow ourselves to be informed – perhaps even transformed – by the parable about the one who risked approaching.

Why does it matter that the main characters in the parable were a Samaritan and a Jew? It matters in the same way that ethnicity and religion matter in our St. Croix Valley or any other community today. Cultural differences tend to form boundaries between peoples. *“But a Samaritan, who was taking the same road, also came upon the traveler and, filled with compassion, approached the traveler.”* We hear the word compassion used in many contexts in our day. The Webster definition of compassion is this: *“sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it.”*

Why is it remarkable that the Samaritan was moved to feel compassion for the Jew? First century C.E. Jews and Samaritans claimed common ancestors—the ancient Hebrew people—and claimed to worship the same God. However, these neighboring peoples had cultural and ethnic identities that were distinct from each other.

We might try to understand Samaritans and Jews within our context as being like siblings who grew up together but have since diverged in ideology and lifestyle or like two neighboring churches whose affiliations situate them differently along the spectrum between conservative and liberal theology. As in some cases among adult siblings or Christians of different stripes, Samaritans and Jews shared intertwining roots to a common source, but they kept each other at arm's length—as unsavory others with whom they would rather not intermingle.

It matters that a Samaritan approached a Jew who had been beaten, stripped naked, and left half-dead because cultural norms would have prevented them from approaching. *“But a Samaritan, who was taking the same road, also came upon the traveler and, filled with compassion, approached the traveler.”* The Samaritan consciously chose to step outside their comfort zone to notice and risk emotional involvement the other.

There was also socioeconomic division between Jesus and the religious scholar who posed the two key questions of *“What must I do to inherit everlasting life?”* and *“just who is my neighbor?”* While the two men shared many religious and ethnic traits, their culture situated them within two very different social classes. The religious scholar, an expert in interpretation of Torah, would have been highly respected within the community.

In contrast, Jesus was a working-class itinerant preacher who had come to be a trusted rabbi only by word of mouth from people who had drawn inspiration from his healings and teachings. So, we must pay attention to the first verse of our text, which reads, *“An expert on the Law stood up to put Jesus to the test.”* Did they address Jesus with a condescending, ‘Hey! Who do you think you are, anyway? I’ll give you a piece of my mind.’

No. They addressed Jesus as rabbi (teacher), respectfully inviting Jesus into dialogue. It was a rich tradition of first century Pharisaic Judaism to engage in rigorous debate of Torah with a worthy conversation partner. In this sense, the scholar was one who, like the Samaritan, chose to approach. They approached Jesus instead of keeping Jesus at arm's length (a distance from which they could simply judge Jesus instead of seeking to know him). *"But a religious scholar, who was taking the same road, also came upon Jesus and, filled with compassion, approached Jesus..."* It is in approaching that the Samaritan and the religious scholar could each truly begin to see and be moved by a cultural other.

This text has often caused me to reflect upon an all-too-common admonition in American pop culture—that of 'don't go there.' There are particular individuals in each of our family, work and social circles with whom we either avoid discussion of important topics altogether or engage but then shut down as soon our hackles start to rise. Unfortunately, these very conversations are often the ones that could make significant inroads toward deeper understanding of one another. Friends, the expert in Torah, Jesus, the Samaritan – they all 'went there.' And I don't think that any of us would really want our gravestones to read: 'Pleasant. Benign. Didn't go there.'

We might ask, from where did the Pharisee, Jesus, and the fictional Samaritan gather the courage to 'go there,' to approach one another, risking mutual experience, understanding and even the transformation of their minds? All three must have drawn from the oldest, strongest law in their faith tradition—the one that had been passed down from generation to generation:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” They trusted in the God that was the connective energy among them and is the connective energy among us today—connecting selves worth loving and communities worth loving.

Matthew Skinner, professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary in St. Paul offers the following thought about the parable: *“The lawyer wants to define who deserves his love, but Jesus’ parable suggests that love seeks out neighbors to receive compassion and care, even when established boundaries or prejudices conspire against it”* (FOTW C.3, p. 243). Jesus’ God and our God IS that love that seeks out neighbors.

Amy-Jill Levine is professor emeritus of Jewish studies, New Testament and early Christianity at Vanderbilt Divinity School. In her book, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus*, Levine asked deeply moving questions about this parable. She wrote, *“We should think of ourselves as the person in the ditch and then ask, ‘Is there anyone, from any group, about whom we’d rather die than acknowledge, ‘she offered help’ or ‘He showed compassion?’ More, is there any group whose members might rather die than help us?”* I feel that the final question of who might rather die than help me plays right into my embedded prejudices, but I am gripped by the first question. About whom would I rather die than acknowledge, ‘she offered help’ or ‘he showed compassion?’

How would you fill in this blank? But a _____ while traveling came upon me and, filled with compassion, approached me.

But a corporate executive, but my brother-in-law, but my neighborhood nemesis, but my most politically other relative, but a person of color, but a teenager... while traveling came upon me and, filled with compassion, approached me. Who might go there for you? I'll repeat Professor Levine's challenge so that it stays with us: *"We should think of ourselves as the person in the ditch and then ask, 'Is there anyone, from any group, about whom we'd rather die than acknowledge, 'she offered help' or 'He showed compassion?'"*

In a peculiar way, our scripture reading flows from Jesus' encounter with the religious scholar to his arrival at Martha's home. Does Jesus practice his own teaching to be open to approaching the other? I think he does, with a particular focus on openness to listening. We heard, *"Martha, who was busy with all the details of hospitality, came to Jesus and said, 'Rabbi, don't you care that my sister has left me all alone to do the household tasks? Tell her to help me!' Jesus replied, 'Martha, Martha! You're anxious and upset about so many things, but only a few things are necessary—really only one, Mary has chosen the better part, and she won't be deprived of it.'"*

It has been common to interpret Jesus's words as scolding Martha for being in the wrong. But a careful reading reveals that Jesus took note of Martha's stress, named her anxiety and upset, and invited her to an alternative – to pause in her labors of love to listen and receive. Jesus didn't call Martha out for wrong action but rather invited her into a posture of openness and listening – a posture of receptivity. Perhaps it is actually more blessed (more connected to the purpose of love) to receive than to give.

Finally, in the Hebrew scripture reading for today, Abraham's encounter with travelers shows us how a posture of quiet listening can create space for noticing the other with a heart and mind ready to welcome and offer care. We heard, *"God appeared to Abraham by the oak grove of Mamre, while Abraham sat at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. Looking up, Abraham saw three travelers standing nearby. When he saw them, Abraham ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them; and bowing to the ground, said, "If I have found favor in your eyes, please do not pass our tent. Let some water be brought, that you may bathe your feet, and then rest yourselves beneath this tree. As you have come to your faithful one, let me bring you a little food, that you may refresh yourselves."*

God appeared... Abraham sat in the heat...Looking up, Abraham saw...

The stories of our Christian faith (both ancient and contemporary) remind us that the life-giving power of God's love is experienced through human connections. May we each choose to engage in courageous, unexpected, grace-filled interactions with others. May we each be one who *'comes upon others and, filled with compassion, approaches.'* May we each be receptive to the people who surprise us by approaching us with compassion. Let's go there, because Love is counting on us. Amen!

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People's Congregational Church (Bayport, MN)
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Genesis 18: 1-8, Luke 10: 25-37, 38-42