



“Enemies, Compassion and Transformation”
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Luke 10: 25-37

The parable of the Good Samaritan was once my favorite parable and teaching of Jesus. It was a favorite because I didn't really understand it. I thought it was simply about whether to stop for someone in need. I domesticated Jesus, that is, I made him safe by thinking he was teaching about such things as whether to stop for hitchhikers. When I began to understand this parable better it moved from being my favorite to a most disturbing and challenging teaching. This morning I invite us to look more closely at this powerful teaching but we must be careful for we might bump into the gospel and so often that is such a difficult and disturbing encounter!

Because of this one and his deeds, the name Samaritan has become synonymous with caring, with compassion, with mercy and it has become affixed to countless hospitals, counseling centers, and shelters. This nameless one stopped and showed compassion and became forever associated with compassion and mercy. This parable has become one of Jesus' most famous and there is wide agreement among New Testament scholars that it really is at the heart of Jesus' teachings. But to understand this parable better we must understand something about the day and time in which Jesus lived: we must understand the Jewish purity system of the first century.

During the course of Jewish history, the people of Israel heard the call of God to be "holy" as God is holy, but they eventually interpreted this to mean that they were to be "pure". That is, to be holy, like God, meant to be pure and cleansed and so over the years a *purity system* was established in their attempt to answer God's call. What developed was an intricate system of rules and laws about purity and cleanliness and like so many attempts at experiencing the Divine, things eventually went awry and that desire, that

yearning, that attempt to be in relationship with the Sacred became more of an institutional burden than a help. Instead of helping people with their yearning for a connection with God, the system itself began to get in people's way because what resulted was a *rigid* system of who's in and who's out, who's pure and who's not.

In Jesus' day, for example, one could be born pure—yes, born pure, for some were born into a class that was considered pure. For example, Priests and Levites were considered to be born pure. On down the purity scale at birth would be other Jews, then converts to Judaism, and way down the purity list would be those who were without proper parentage and then those with damaged bodies, and at the very bottom would be those who were born female. Females were at the very bottom of the purity list.

Now, if you were not born into purity, you could become pure through your behavior. That is, you could be observant of purity codes and keep them rigidly, if you had the money, and then you could become pure and holy, like God. So the pure were those who were carefully observant of the laws and in the New Testament these people were called the “righteous,” while those who didn't follow the purity laws were called “sinners.” Sin was being impure and therefore unholy.

So, a purity map developed over the centuries that said on the one side were those who were pure and on the other were the impure. Over here on the pure side were males but over here on the impure side were females. The pure would include the rich but the poor would be impure and literally could not practice the purity laws because they could not afford to. The physically whole would be pure while the maimed, the blind, the ill, the lepers, the eunuchs would be impure. The Jews would be pure but the Gentiles impure. The righteous were pure and the sinners impure.

Jesus of Nazareth grew up in that system and knew it well. I think it was a result of his experience of the Sacred, of God, that he began to wonder about this purity system. On the one hand, he *experienced* a God of love who loved all persons, a God of compassion, but then he looked at this purity system and what's he to believe—his experience of God or the teachings of this system? Eventually Jesus said to be like God was *not* to be pure but to be like God was to be loving and compassionate. Jesus eventually indicted the whole system in scathing attacks. He said purity was on the inside, not outside. He said purity was a matter of the heart, not of externals. Jesus even touched the most unclean of all—he touched women. He taught one woman the Torah while her sister could not free herself from the system that said women could not be taught. Jesus healed on the Sabbath and thus made it unholy. The Sabbath had become a monument to purity instead of a time of Being. And you see, this whole purity system could be seen in the story of Jesus' birth, since the blood at the birthing of Jesus would have rendered the inn unclean and the innkeeper would have lost several weeks income by having to have the inn ritually cleansed again. He did such a gracious thing letting Mary and Joseph have the stable for the birthing but notice the irony of Luke's gospel: Here at his birth the one who would later experience a God of compassion, not purity, was born in the middle of all the dirt, the animals, the mess of life—very impure!

Later, in the Jesus movement there were women disciples and women who gave money to his movement to reform or renew Judaism. And whom did Jesus say to invite to dinner? He said don't invite your friends, for they'll just return the favor. He taught to invite those on the bottom, the poor, the blind, the maimed, those who cannot invite you in return. Jesus hung around the impure—the prostitutes, the beggars, the drunks, the tax-collectors, the poor, the maimed.

Not long after entering Jerusalem, he went to the center of the purity system, the Temple, and drove the animals out, kicked over the tables where the poor were being cheated in their attempts to buy sacrifice and purity. Here he attacked the *economics* of the purity system and you know that when you attack the economics of a system, you can get in real trouble!

When Jesus was at Table, he violated all the rules about what could be eaten, how the food was to be prepared, and with whom one could eat. He ate with the outcasts, the impure. He “reclined”—not an ordinary meal, but a celebration. Jesus turned being impure into a cause for celebration! His enemies said he was a drunk who ate with “sinners.” His open table fellowship was perceived as a threat to the purity system—because it was!

Jesus embodied a radically alternative social vision based upon his relationship with God who loved all, no matter their economics or sin. He had a vision of a new kingdom of God in which everything was turned upside down: the poor and impure would be first, instead of last.

Now let's look at this parable of the compassionate Samaritan for the spirit and mind of Jesus. The wounded man on the side of the road or in the ditch was probably a Jew because Jesus is telling the story in response to the lawyer's trick question, so to get him to identify with someone in the story, the wounded man must have been a Judean. The Priest and Levite pass by on the other side because they are going down for rest after serving in the Temple and when they come upon the wounded man, all they see is the blood and the mess. What they see is impurity and they cannot stop for they will be rendered ritually unclean and will have to go back up to Jerusalem to undergo ritual cleansing. They simply could not stop, for their religion prevented such compassion. Religion, when based in purity, really can prevent compassion.

Now look at this scene from the view of the wounded man in the ditch. He sees two of his own kind come upon him and pass him by. Now, he must intellectually understand that the Priest and Levite must pass him by, but being wounded, does he really get it? Could his religion be challenged by his need? What does he really feel as he sees them go by? Here are two of *his own* people who cannot show him compassion because they will be rendered impure and then later he looks up and someone seems to be stopping. Who stops? It is a Samaritan—a member of a mixed race, a “half-breed,” and radically impure. Samaritans had, contrary to Jewish purity laws, intermarried with the neighboring peoples and had become a new people—the Samaritans. And the Jews hated them for being

impure and the Samaritans hated them back, for they, as the oppressed, had grown tired of being kicked around.

And now, in this parable, these two look at each other, enemy to enemy, Samaritan to Jew, oppressed to oppressor, but *now* they are *equals*, for now impurity looks upon impurity! What a scene! A Samaritan looks upon a wounded Judean. The one wounded all his life looks upon the one wounded recently by robbers. What do they each see? Put yourself in the place of each person. What would it be like to receive help from someone you just can't stand, someone you despise, someone who has deeply wounded you? Who would that be for you? Who is someone in your life from whom it would be so really hard to receive help—physical, emotional or spiritual help?

Now let's reverse it. Be like the Samaritan. What do you see as you look down into your enemy's face? A question we often don't ask is what did it take for the Samaritan to feel compassion and be able to stop? What kind of transformation has to have happened in his life for him to stop for an oppressor? How was he able to love an enemy? How is it that this Samaritan was able to transcend his wounds and to feel compassion for a Jew? Here they see each other eye to eye and he feels compassion. Why? For whom would it be hardest for *you* to feel compassion? What kind of transformation is it going to take for *you* to be able to love that one? You see, this parable is not about whether you and I would stop and help someone in trouble on the highway. It is about the spiritual practice of compassion and forgiveness that leads you to loving your enemies. Think of enemy here not in the sense of an archrival, or that foxhole view of an enemy. Here the enemy is the one in your life that is hard to love, hard to forgive, hard to learn from, hard to help or receive help from. This parable is about *our transformation* from *our* rigid purity systems to compassion, forgiveness, and love for all—even those hardest to love.

This parable is a full-scale, broad-sided attack upon a corrupt and patriarchal religious and economic system. Again, imagine the scene: Jesus is telling a story to a Judean attorney as people all around listen and he has as the hero of the story a mixed-race Samaritan, an impure one who is not interested in purity, but in compassion, who took this wounded one to a place in which he couldn't even stay. Clarence Jordan, in his Cotton-Patch gospel, has an African-American stopping for a known Klansman in rural Georgia. To this attorney and to this crowd Jesus is saying that is what God is like--God is like the Samaritan, not like the Priest and Levite who pass by on the other side so as to stay pure. Just imagine for a moment the thoughts that went through the minds of those in the crowd and the looks on their faces. They knew just how radical this teaching was.

We in the church need to continue to struggle with how to love and forgive, with bringing The New Reality that Jesus envisioned into being. That is our calling if we would be faithful—to turn the tables of the Temple upside down, to see the eschatological reversal come about, to see the kingdom come a little bit closer in *our* time, when everything will be reversed. We are to be the midwives of that kingdom, to try in all our small ways to help birth that New Reality.

In God's kingdom, according to the vision of Jesus, the impure will be first, the blind shall see, and all persons, regardless of orientation, will be honored for who they are in their God-given sexuality. As we work toward this New Reality, persons of more color will teach us of lesser color; those of us who are male will learn from those who are female; those of us who have been living here will learn from the immigrants; those of us who are Christians will learn from those on a different spiritual path. But all this will require *our transformation*, learning how to love our neighbors, and coming to love those we don't want to love or forgive or even learn from. And we need these enemies badly, for we project some of our darkness *only* onto our enemies. Therefore we must learn to love them so that we can withdraw our projections, take ourselves on, and get honest.

At the end of the parable, when Jesus asked the Jewish attorney who in the story had acted like a neighbor, the man couldn't even bring himself to say the word Samaritan. He responded: "The one who showed compassion." May it be said of you and of Westminster Church: "They were those who showed compassion." May you recommit yourselves to this journey of learning how to love, to learning about enemies, compassion, and transformation.