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First Congregational Church of Blue Hill

July 13, 2025

**“Lost Opportunity”**

*Serving each other is an opportunity—not an obligation*

**Luke 10: 25-37** 25Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” 26He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” 27He answered, “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.”28And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.” 29But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” 30Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. 31Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. 32So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. 34He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. 35The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ 36Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” 37He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

I’ve been looking forward to summer in Blue Hill, and to this morning with you, for several months now. This past year at Harvard has been kind of an ordeal; it’s been hard on the faculty and administrators to be sure, but most of all it’s been hard on our students, who don’t quite know how to make plans from one day to the next. For example, we’re just 6 weeks out from the start of term, and we’re still unsure if we’re going to be able to enroll international students—or if they will choose to come even if we are allowed. It’s all very upsetting.

Even in the midst of all of the turmoil of the last school year, we did have one triumph I wanted to share. A group of colleagues and I launched a new course called The Spiritual Lives of Leaders. It brings together students from across Harvard, MIT and Tufts to explore the intersection of faith, spirituality and leadership, in conversation with leaders from around the world. It’s quite a departure from the normal fare at the school, and the students were wonderful: engaged, alert, and hungry for spiritual grounding.

I raise this this morning because one of our students, a first-year divinity school student named Liam Kenney, said something to me recently that changed how I read this morning’s Gospel story of the Good Samaritan. I think his words landed with me because I’ve been anxious about preaching on this text in these distinctly un-neighborly times in our public life. I haven’t been sure what to say about a story that is so familiar to all of us, and yet one whose moral we seem to ignore completely.

So let me tell you about my conversation with Liam.

Liam works at a homeless shelter in Harvard Square, cleaning rooms, preparing meals, washing dishes. We had him over to dinner recently, and it occurred to me to ask him, “Liam, when you see one of your guests from the shelter around Harvard Square, what do you do?” I was curious about this because I often don’t know what to do when I encounter homeless people in the Square. If I have cash, I give them some, but I carry cash less often these days so I’m often left to just smile, say “Hi” and keep walking. It’s sort of awkward. It feels incomplete.

Liam didn’t hesitate in answering me. He said, “I go to the ATM periodically and get cash and then change it into small bills so that I always have something to give. I don’t know what they’ll do with it—I guess it’s not my business, really—but it makes me happy to have the opportunity to help them out.”

That one word—opportunity—landed hard with me. I had been thinking about helping as an obligation. Liam saw it as a gift. As a joy. I found that so powerful. And the space, the gap, from obligation to opportunity, is not small. In some ways, it’s everything.

I was thinking of Liam the next time I read this story of the Good Samaritan, and I realized that the lesson he embodies is precisely what Jesus was attempting to teach the lawyer and his listeners—and us—about the opportunity that exists for us in serving each other.

We all know the parable. A man is beaten, stripped, left for dead. A priest walks by—crosses over to the other side of the road to avoid him. Then a Levite—another religious leader—does the same thing. And then a Samaritan, despised by the audience Jesus is speaking to, stops. He not only stops to help, but he’s almost cartoonishly generous in rising to the opportunity to help the wounded traveler. It’s almost like he feels lucky to have come upon him. He goes to him, he anoints his wounds with oil and wine to clean them, he bandages him, he puts him on his own animal, he brings him to an inn, he stays for a day to care for him, he gives the innkeeper money for anything the traveler might need until he gets back, presumably he does then return two days later to check in on him and to settle the traveler’s accounts at the inn.

Now here’s something I hadn’t noticed before. The question that prompted the parable—the question the lawyer asked Jesus—was not, “What must I believe?” but rather “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” The lawyer isn’t trying to understand compassion—he’s trying to understand the boundaries of his responsibility. What must I do? What am I obliged to do? Jesus asks him what’s written in the law, and the lawyer replies, “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.”

Jesus commends him, and the lawyer sticks with this theme and follows up with “And who is my neighbor?” Who qualifies as my neighbor? Who’s in, and who’s out? How can I draw lines of accountability? Jesus responds not by defining the category of “neighbor,” but by dismissing it. He shows that goodness doesn’t come from credentials or nationality. The people his audience expected to do the right thing didn’t. The one they looked down upon did.

My friend and mentor Clay Christensen used to say that when we keep failing to solve a problem, it’s often because we’ve gotten the categories wrong. That’s what’s happening here. Jesus teaches that the proper categorization is not “neighbor vs. stranger” or “Jew vs. Samaritan” or “religious leader vs. lay person.” There’s only one category; the category is humanity—we are all neighbors. The lawyer wants to draw a boundary marker. Jesus erases the line.

The Samaritan lavished care on the traveler, going well beyond mere obligation. And Jesus charges the lawyer, his listeners, and us to “Go and do likewise.”

This is not a new idea in scripture. Offering assistance to those in need, to the weak and the vulnerable, is not an afterthought or a footnote. All of the Abrahamic religions place this at the center; The Prophet Muhammad spoke of the holiness of “the upper hand”—the hand that gives—the opportunity to serve God and ourselves through beneficent devotion to those in need.

In Judaism: It's remarkable to read from the Holiness Code in Leviticus given what is happening in our country today:

When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt; I am the Lord your God. (Leviticus 19:33-34)

I think the reason that reading this parable at this time has troubled me is that we so obviously are not acting as if we understand this commandment in the law:

* Asylum seekers who have come to our country in search of new hope for their lives are being turned away at the border; they’re almost literally hitting a wall;
* Those who are here on temporary protected status are being systematically rounded up and caged;
* News reports of undocumented immigrants who have been here for decades being arrested and deported are breaking up families and roiling communities across the country;
* And it’s not just migrants. Just in the past week, millions of the most vulnerable Americans are due to lose Medicaid coverage in order to pay for tax cuts for the wealthiest among us.

I don’t mean to be making a political statement, though I suppose I am. I really mean to be making a human observation: In all of the conversations we’ve been having across the past year over what to do about America’s border and immigration problems and our social safety net, I can’t remember a single instance of any government official, at any level, in either party, framing the challenge before us as presenting an opportunity to help these people.

Can you?

We say, “We have to take care of our own” and “We have to reduce dependency” without acknowledging that we are all each other’s. Our opportunity, to grow in grace and in faith, is to behave as the Samaritan—to erase the boundaries that we draw and to show mercy to each other.

But why is this so hard? Why are we so familiar with this parable, so moved by its message, over thousands of years of telling and retelling, and yet so reluctant to live it out?

Jesus told stories about individual encounters—one person jumping at the chance to help another person lying wounded on the road. The challenges we face today involve millions of people and complex systems that can feel too big for any of us to address, but they start at the same level—the level of the individual.

So what can we do? How do we live this parable in our time? I’ve had one thought, that circles back to where I started this morning.

Whether most immediately, or most obviously, we can all resolve to follow Liam’s example. Not just what Liam does, but how he frames what he does. We need to learn to see that the opportunities that arise in our daily lives to be of help are placed in our way for a purpose. We sometimes think that people like the Good Samaritan—or like Liam—are just wired that way. Born good. Naturally kind. That may well be true—Liam is pretty terrific. But the real truth is deeper and more hopeful: We don’t do good things because we are good; we’re good because we do good things.

It’s in the stopping, the seeing, the helping—it’s in the practice of mercy—that our souls are shaped. That’s the invitation Jesus gives us. To grow in grace by doing grace. To become good by doing good.

It’s worth calling out when we see it in action. I’ve been inspired by Val’s advocacy for the young people who come to the States to work at Hannaford every summer. While they’re here, we have the opportunity to help them get on to the next step in their journey.

When we learn to see these moments as Liam does, as opportunities rather than obligations, and to embrace each one, we’re not just following Jesus' teaching, we're fulfilling it. We're creating the beloved community he envisioned, where we step forward to fill the gaps between us. That's perhaps the ultimate power of this parable: it shows us that the kingdom of God isn't built by governments or institutions—it's built by ordinary people choosing, again and again, to see each other as neighbors worth serving.

May it be so for us.

Let us pray:

Gracious God, open our hearts to the opportunities you place in our path each day. Give us hearts that are eager to serve, not out of obligation but out of love and gratitude. Use our hands and our hearts to bring hope and healing to a hurting world.

In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.