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Interrupted by God

*When he saw him, he was moved with pity.*

**The Parable of the Good Samaritan**

25 Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” 26 He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” 27 He 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.” 28 And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

29 But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” 30 Jesus 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. 31 Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. 32 So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33  But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. 34 He 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. 35 The 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.’

36 Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” 37 He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.” (Luke 10:25-37 NRSV)

***May God bless this reading of His word.***

But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity.

There’s a case study that we teach in our leadership course at Harvard Business School that kept coming to my mind as I was preparing this sermon. It’s a true story, about an American soldier named Joe Gifford, and a split-second, life-or-death decision he had to make during his tour of duty in Iraq.

Joe was a 23-year-old platoon leader in the Army’s 6th Armored Cavalry Regiment, and in September 2005 he was leading 50 US and Iraqi Army soldiers on a mission to secure buildings in an incredibly dangerous city in northeastern Iraq called Tal Afar. Their mission meant entering buildings not controlled by the coalition, searching them, clearing them of insurgents, and then keeping them cleared.

A house that Gifford and his men had just entered was different from any they’d encountered before. The air was thick with caustic fumes. It burned their eyes and throats and made breathing hard. A few soldiers, who had gone deeper into the house, found huge drums of what appeared to be chemicals, with blue wires running to the ceiling. The soldiers quickly realized they were inside an enormous bomb and began running out of the house, forcing everyone trying to enter back into the street.

The next few minutes were bedlam. Joe and his fellow officers physically grabbed and pushed soldiers back into the platoon’s Bradley Fighting Vehicles, which were heavily armored and offered some protection. As he pushed the last man into the Bradley, Joe started wondering why the building hadn’t blown up. Maybe the triggerman had fallen asleep. Maybe the detonator had failed. Maybe the triggerman was watching and enjoying all of the confusion and was waiting for just the right moment to detonate the bomb.

As the ramp on the Bradley closed, Gifford found himself thinking about three Iraqi civilians he and his men had seen in the house next door to the one with the bomb. When they cleared this house, they found an elderly Iraqi woman and two toddlers. They had let them stay where they were, and then proceeded to enter the house rigged with explosives.

Joe was certain the three would die if the device detonated, but he was less sure of their innocence. How could the woman not know about the bomb next door? Why would she still be in Tal Afar, after the coalition had ordered all civilians to evacuate? And even if they were innocent, should he risk his life and those of his soldiers by returning to the house to try to save them?

Gifford told the platoon sergeant that he thought they had to find a way to go in and rescue the woman and her children, but the sergeant strongly disagreed, saying that there was no way she didn’t know the house was rigged to blow. Gifford resolved to go in anyway. He asked for volunteers to come with him, and two very young privates did so.

When they entered the building, they found the woman and children sitting where they were before. None of the soldiers spoke Arabic, and the Iraqis didn’t speak English, so Gifford couldn’t explain his intentions. The three resisted leaving the house with all of their might, so Joe and his soldiers lifted them bodily and took them into a house several blocks away, outside the likely blast radius.

Joe and his platoon returned to their base. The bomb squad that came to deal with the situation reported that the bomb detonated with such force that it lifted a 70-ton tank off the ground. The blast reduced the whole block to rubble, leveling the house where the three Iraqis had been. Joe never saw them again.

Joe didn’t exactly get in trouble for his decision, but he likewise never learned if his commander approved of his actions or not. When his soldiers would talk about it, they would call him bold, but that wasn’t meant as an endorsement. He continued to think he’d made a good decision, but he wondered why he was alone in thinking this.

This is where the case ends.

I thought about Joe and his actions a lot this past week as I reflected on this parable of The Good Samaritan because in a way the two stories share a central mystery. What was the impulse in Joe that caused him to stop, and to turn back, and to risk his life to rescue that woman and her children? What was on Joe’s mind, or what had touched his heart, as he considered what to do in that moment?

A moment of mercy, out of the clear blue, on a busy, dusty battlefield. And so we read of another moment of mercy on the dusty road that leads from Jerusalem to Jericho.

Like Joe, the Samaritan in our story was a sort of accidental hero. He faced similarly long odds in deciding to stop and help the unfortunate man on the Jericho Road that day. Literally everything argued against his stopping to help, in fact. He was in a foreign country, in Judea, surrounded by people who held him in contempt. A Samaritan among Jews. He couldn’t really be sure that the man was legitimately hurt and wasn’t simply a trap, or a decoy. The Jericho Road was notorious as a haven for robbers, treacherous in its topography with lots of hiding places in its twists and turns. Not the kind of place you would tarry. And we’re told he was traveling on some business, on his way to a destination. What caused him to stop?

And what caused the priest and the Levite to pass the man by—to cross to the other side of the road to avoid stepping over him? If they were hypocrites, or uncaring, that might explain their behavior, but Jesus doesn’t accuse them of that—he doesn’t accuse them of anything, really. Why didn’t the people you would imagine would stop, stop? In a sermon on this passage, Martin Luther King wrote:

I imagine that the first question which the priest and the Levite asked was: “If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?” But by the very nature of his concern, the good Samaritan reversed the question: “If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?”

How do we make our own decisions about when to stop and help an anonymous stranger? When we do stop, why; and when we don’t, why not?

Jesus had the answer, he knew the answer to the lawyer’s question “Who is my neighbor?”; he just wasn’t going to play his game. As we read in the passage, the lawyer, an expert in Scripture, was seeking to test Jesus—to engage him in a bit of theological cat-and-mouse. “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Like any good teacher, Jesus answers the question with his own question: “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” The lawyer supplied the answer that everyone in attendance knew by heart, from the Torah (Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18): “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.”

Then, the lawyer, “seeking to justify himself,” we’re told, asks a follow-on—asks Jesus to define his terms: “And who is my neighbor?” What he’s really asking, of course, is “Who is not my neighbor?” He wants to know the limits of love, to know where he can draw the line without breaking the law. That’s the debate that the lawyer wants to engage in with Jesus: Whom does scripture say we have to serve, and whom can we safely ignore? Slaves, women, foreigners, Samaritans certainly—in all of these instances we can give ourselves a pass.

Like the lawyer, we want to be able to draw our circles of concern to fit our own convenience and preconceptions. We want to be able to define who our neighbor is, and therefore who it isn’t, while God wants us not to ask, but to act. To extend loving-kindness to all whom we encounter. That’s the meaning of the word “neighbor,” in fact, its etymology: “to draw near, to come alongside.” It’s less planful and more circumstantial—more Providential, perhaps, than we’re comfortable with. The problem with trying to draw these lines is that you can’t know who your neighbor is or isn’t in advance. All those to whom we draw near, those whom we have eyes to see, have this claim on us.

By answering the lawyer in in the way that he does, by again answering his question with a question, Jesus is telling us that he wants us to stop measuring out mercy and instead to lavish loving kindness on those we come near. He structures the story to demonstrate the standard he is proposing. Look at the extravagance of the care that the Samaritan provides: he pours oil and wine on the man’s wounds; he bandages him up; he walks alongside while the man rides on his animal; he checks him into an inn and stays to care for him; when he has to go he arranges in advance to pay any additional costs that the innkeeper incurs. Jesus wants us to know that this is not a close accounting.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer reflected extensively on the implications of the lawyer’s question on our life together. He considered the question “Who is my neighbor?” to be the way in which disobedience to God justifies itself. In this way, he thought that Christian ethics becomes an excuse for not doing what we should do. He wrote:

We must be ready to allow ourselves to be interrupted by God. God will be constantly crossing our paths and canceling our plans by sending us people with claims and petitions. We may pass them by, preoccupied with our more important tasks, but to abide in love means to have open eyes, to be able to see what only a few can see.

Interrupted by God. I think that’s what unites Joe and the Good Samaritan. They allowed themselves to be interrupted long enough to open their eyes to the needs of those to whom they had drawn near.

To allow yourself to be interrupted. That’s the nub of it, isn’t it?

It would be easier for us to dismiss the priest and the Levite if Jesus had labeled them as uncaring or hypocritical, but the truth might be very different from this. I’d like to think that I would act as the Samaritan in this story, but I know far too many times when I have walked through Harvard Square as the priest or the Levite did, busy on some imagined errand, and not a neighbor in sight!

I think Joe’s story helps me to understand the Samaritan a little better, as a person and not merely as a symbol. He’s not some cardboard icon, some paragon of unceasing virtue. We know nothing of him other than that on this particular day he stopped—he allowed himself to be interrupted by God. We can do this too.

In answering the lawyer’s question with this story, Jesus is reminding us to open our eyes, to slow down and to practice the loving kindness with each other that God has shown us and that we in turn are capable of showing each other.

I want to leave you with one closing thought. I told you that my colleagues and I have created this course called The Spiritual Lives of Leaders. One of those leaders, a man named Bob Chapman, runs a very successful global manufacturing company. He has a message that he lives and leads by, and that he is evangelizing to his fellow leaders in business. He asks us to remember this, that “Everyone is someone’s precious child.”

A woman and her children in a battle zone in Iraq, a certain man by the side of the Jericho road, each of us, God’s precious children. The world is constructed to give us permission to ignore the needs of those to whom we draw near. Closing our borders to refugees, closing our ears to those in need, turning the formerly incarcerated away from our doors. We have to neighbor as if our lives depended on it. Because maybe they do! We are all on the Jericho Road, and we can use all of the grace that we can muster if we’re to get through this life as God‘s people, in life together, in this world and the next. Amen.