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Luke 10:25-37
Grace Episcopal Church, Alexandria, VA

I confess that I have never liked this gospel reading because it has always felt obvious to me. It's a lesson in basic ethics that any kindergartener should understand. First the priest goes down the road, and then the Levite, I know what's coming next. I already know what we are supposed to be doing. The problem is not that we don't understand what Jesus says. The problem is that we understand too well and we're not prepared to do it.

This is how I feel about the gospel when I understand it as a lesson in ethics. But I am starting to think I am hearing the gospel wrong. I think that it is not about ethics so much as it is about identity. It's not about what to do as much as it is about who to be.

We start with this lawyer standing up in front of Jesus. He quizzes Jesus about eternal life, and Jesus quizzes him right back about the law, and the lawyer knows the textbook answer. But then: "wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'"

This is the moment that the lawyer loses sympathy from most of us, because he looks like a big, sneaky weasel. He seems to want to limit the requirements of the law, to find a loophole that will let him off any hook he might find himself on. He understands what the law wants. He's just not prepared to do it.

But I wonder if I am hearing that right. I think his question is one that might actually deserve our sympathy, even our empathy. Because isn't the task of love fundamentally overwhelming? How are we supposed to manage with an entire planet full of neighbors? The need of our world never stops. We live in a world where a virus can hop on a plane and infect someone on the other side of the globe, where a shortage of wheat in Ukraine can contribute to a famine in Somalia. I don't know if I want a loophole exactly, but I want a break.

Who is my neighbor? Under that lawyer's question I hear grief at human limitation. I hear the fear of being vulnerable to intractable and relentless pain without resources to fix it.

Jesus responds to that lawyer, and I've always thought that he tells this snarky little parable to put the lawyer in his place. Except: I wonder if I'm really hearing that right, too. Because Jesus is generally not snarky but compassionate. What if this is perhaps a response meant not in reprimand but in love? What if he is speaking not to that lawyer's conscience but to his grief?

When I listen to Jesus's response in that light, I hear something new. Two pillars of the Israelite community walk down the road and they see the same tragedy and they pass by. And then the Samaritan comes, the outsider. And that's when the important thing happens.

He is moved by pity. He is moved by what might instead be translated as compassion. He goes on and does more, of course—he patches him up, he takes him to get care, he pays his bills. But the very first thing he does is to allow himself to feel.

The Samaritan is the first person in this parable who takes a real risk, which is not with his time or his wallet or even his physical safety, but with his heart. He does what most of us find so hard to do, what that lawyer found so hard to do: he feels grief. He makes himself vulnerable by caring about a problem before knowing whether it's something he can fix. He ventures compassion.

In Luke's gospel, compassion is the hallmark of God. It is God's thing, his signature move, his go-to course of action. Compassion is the father in the story of the prodigal son; compassion is Jesus before the lost and hurting crowds.

So when the Samaritan acts from a place of compassion? He is doing, at the most basic level, what God does. This is not simply a gesture of ethics. It's a statement of identity. To feel pity, to have compassion: these things are not just what we do because Jesus teaches us. It's how we are like Jesus. It's how we grow into people who resemble God.

What Jesus ultimately seems to be offering in this story—to the lawyer, to me, to you—is the invitation to a compassionate life. He takes the easy answer to the question of neighbor—duh, it's the person who lives next door—and gives us something harder but better, which is the startling possibility that we can choose connection all the time. We don't have to; we can play it safe and only love where it feels manageable. Or we can open our hearts to human kinship.

This open heart doesn't equal a bleeding heart. I don't believe that Jesus is telling us we can go out and help every person we find in the ditch. Jesus himself didn't do that, while he was human. But Jesus reminds us that our human limitations don't also need to limit our compassion. While we have to live in this world with the mystery of suffering, we have also been given the mystery of love to help us endure it.

Jesus makes that lawyer a promise: do this, and you will live. I don't think he's talking about salvation in the next life, but in this one. How do we truly *live*?

I think a lot of us turn down the volume on the world to cope. We scroll past the pictures that are too difficult to look at. We avoid the left-hand turn lane if there's a guy holding up a sign asking for money. We make ourselves a little numb. And so we're safe. But we're not really all the way alive.

This is not who God wants us to be. This is not the life God wants for any of us—not you, not me, not the guy in the ditch, not the people in those pictures from Ukraine or Somalia or any other place of pain. God wants us to feel with one another so that we can learn to stand for one another.

In the end, I don't think this story is in the bible as a zinger. It's there as hope. I want us to hear that right. God hopes. God hopes that we will look a little more like him every day. God hopes that we might be unafraid to open our hearts to one another. God hopes that we might live as kin to one another. God hopes all that, because God's compassion never runs out. Perhaps one day, our compassion will be just as inexhaustible, too.