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I expect if there is one story in the New Testament that is familiar to most everyone, across religious and non-religious boundaries, it is this story from Luke about the Good Samaritan. But I often wonder how many of us grasp the impact of this famous parable.

This parable has become so well known that it has been watered down and no longer has the scandalous impact that it did when Jesus told it. First of all the name we have given this parable is ironic. We refer to the Samaritan as good but in Jesus' day a Samaritan was anything but good. To the Jewish people Samaritans were evil, beyond redemption and to be avoided at all costs. To put this in modern day realities it is no different than what many Israelis and Palestinians think of each other.

As I said, at the heart of this parable is a scandal and I wonder if we can reclaim that sense of scandal that Jesus evoked in this parable. When we look at this story, it has become apparent that we have cheapened the meaning of it. I say that because now the word Samaritan has been reduced to doing acts of kindness. That's not what this parable is about. It's not about acts of kindness. As I said, the Jews and Samaritans were mortal enemies and hated each other in the depths of their bones. When Jesus tells this story about a Samaritan coming to the aid of a Jew the notion of faith, of God and neighbor is called into question and is forever changed because one man chose to see the other as a fellow human being not as the enemy. That's what this parable is about.

To put this in more contemporary language and situations, we could say the Samaritan is the other; the alien, the heretic, the object of fear, condescension, disgust, and judgment. Think about it this way: Who is the last person on earth you'd ever want to deem "the good guy?" The last person you'd ever want to ask for a favor — much less owe your life too? Whom do you secretly hope to convert, fix, impress, control, or save — but never, ever need that person?

May I throw out some possibilities that hit close to home? A progressive Democrat is robbed, and an ultra conservative Republican saves her life. A white cop is robbed, and an African-American teenager saves his life. A transgender woman is robbed, and an anti-LGBTQ activist saves her life. An outspoken atheist is robbed, and a Bible-thumping fundamentalist saves his life. A border patrol agent is robbed, and an undocumented immigrant saves his life. These scenarios are the contemporary version of this story and put this parable into our context.

I don't mean for a moment to trivialize the real and consequential differences that divide us politically, religiously, racially, or ideologically as these differences are even today costing people their lives. But the enmity between the Jews and the Samaritans in Jesus's day was not theoretical; it was embodied and real. The differences between them were not easily negotiated; each was fully convinced that the other was wrong. It is not so different than today.

So, what Jesus did when he deemed the Samaritan's actions as being right it was radical and risky; it stunned his Jewish listeners. He was asking them to dream of a different kind of kingdom. He was inviting them to consider the possibility that a person might add up to more than the sum of her political, racial, cultural, and economic identities. He was calling them to put aside the history they knew, and the prejudices and hatred they nursed. He was asking them to leave room for divine and world-altering surprises.

The central question in this parable is, “who is my neighbor”? It is a question that has been asked in every age and a question that is still extremely pertinent in our world today. In the heart of this question is how we treat each other from the corporate executive to the homeless person. It is about finding common ground. It is a question that needs to be addressed in our divisiveness in this country over so many issues.

Now, for a moment, I'd like us to look at this parable with a twist or in a different light. Usually, we put our emphasis on the Samaritan or the priest or the Levite and rarely do we speak about the victim. Even though it is not stated in the parable the man obviously was a Jew and he doesn't say anything to the Samaritan. But I'd like to explore two possible ways the victim might have felt having a Samaritan be the one to help him.

The first scenario is he might not have felt very charitable that his mortal enemy was the one to help him. Imagine the Jewish man cursing his rescuer, calling him and his family names and screaming that he is now unclean and his people will hate him for being in contact with a Samaritan. It is a likely scenario since that is the way many of us act when we are confronted by someone we despise who wants to help. Don't touch me – I don't trust you – how many times has that played out between racial, ethnic, political and socioeconomic lines.

But perhaps, the man had other thoughts. Picture yourself, for a moment as that victim. What is going through your mind? Do you even care who this person is? When you're lying bloody in a ditch, and you've had people you thought would help you walk right past you, what matters is not whose help you'd prefer, or whose way of practicing religion you like best, or even whose politics you agree with. What matters is whether or not anyone will stop to show you mercy before you die. All divisions of "us" and "them" disappear out of necessity. But what if we could make those division disappear not out of necessity but because we recognize another human being just like ourselves who needs comfort, help, or someone just to listen.

There's a recent story about a young African American woman who entered a convenient store and as she walked through the door she noticed that there were two white police officers talking to the clerk, an older white woman, behind the counter. They were deep in conversation about the shooting of an African American male by police that had taken place a few days prior. They all looked at her when she walked in and fell silent. She went about her business to get what she was looking for and as she turned back up the aisle to go pay, the oldest officer was watching her. As she got closer he asked her, “How are you doing”. She warily looked at him and replied, Okay and you? He looked at her with a strange look and asked her again, No, how are you really doing? She looked at him and said, “I'm tired. I'm tired of this happening once again. His reply was, “me too.” Then he said, “I guess it's not easy being either of us right now is it.” She said, “No, it's not.” Then, unexpectedly, he hugged her and she cried. She had never seen this man before in her life. She had no idea why he was moved to talk to her. What she does know is that the two of them shared a moment that was absolutely beautiful. No judgments, no justifications, just two people sharing a moment and recognizing each other's humanity.

This story and the parable remind us there are no bystanders in this life. We all know the right thing to do. We know deep in our hearts that we are all connected to one another as neighbors. Yet sometimes it is so hard to act as though we really believe it. So, each one of us, no matter who you are, has to take responsibility for our part in

perhaps creating divisiveness. But more importantly we have to take responsibility in building bridges. We have to find a way to stop pointing our fingers at the other and blaming the other for whatever problems there are. We have to stop pitting one group against another and believing that if you agree or take a stand with one group you must be against the other. For instance, if you like dogs you must hate cats and vice versa. That's silly but in so many conversations on a lot of hot topics that is the position we fall into. If you're prochoice you can't be prolife. If you're pro police you can't be pro black. If you're anti gun you can't be for the 2nd amendment. The reality is you can be for both and it's not about making a choice between the two and pitting one against another. It is about seeing the neighbor in each other – the common ground that brings us together. It's seeing another human being – a child of God who deserves to be treated as such with respect and mercy whether you're blue, black, brown, white, green or purple.

Jesus asked the lawyer after reciting the parable about the Samaritan, "Which one of these acted like a neighbor?" The lawyer replied, "The one who showed mercy." Jesus said, "Go and do likewise." The story and the parable show us how being a neighbor works. The story may have ended, but it is not over.

More than ever we are called over and over again to be the radical good Samaritan – to see the good in everyone, to help others and most of all to show mercy. May we live into this radical parable and as Jesus told the lawyer, "Go and do likewise." Amen