
You Gotta Be ... To Do

A sermon by the Reverend Canon Beth Knowlton

Proper 10 C

Luke 10:25-37

When our second child, Matthew was born, my husband and I were caught a bit unawares. I think having already had a baby, we imagined the transition from one child to two, would not be much of a change. Our daughter was four and a half years old, so really, how much harder could it be?

Well we found out, it could be quite a bit harder actually. Matthew was colicky and seemed to enjoy screaming for several hours each evening. That old advice to sleep while the baby is sleeping is impossible when you have another child, who already has a school schedule and activities. Within a few weeks, we found ourselves stumbling semiconscious through our days, a bit frayed around the edges.

Now, to be perfectly honest, prior to Matthew's birth, we had never had the best looking lawn in the neighborhood. We believed in a somewhat minimalist approach to maintenance and landscaping. But, suffice it to say that during these early days with our second child, what had been passable, now was a bit of an eyesore. It did not seem to be a priority, and frankly with the red-eyed view we had of the world, I am not sure I even noticed.

Until the letter came in the mail.

It arrived in a very official looking envelope and the return address was from the Broadwell Oaks Home Owner's Association. We were it turns out in violation of several key covenants. Unbeknownst to me, it turns out that failure to edge one's lawn, can disrupt property values and erode a sense of neighborly commitment to one another. Tree trimming and having a lawn of the proper height is also of the essence. While the letter was bad enough, I became truly upset when a neighbor called me to ensure that I had received the citation and that we were taking appropriate action to rectify this important situation. The woman who called, was someone I knew and I assumed she might start by checking to see if we were okay, or if we needed any help. She knew we had just had a baby, and frankly as a fellow mom, I was hoping for a little understanding.

Instead, she suggested that I needed to hire a lawn service, and do it quickly.

Now, I am not saying that we didn't need to address the problem. But I have never felt the same way about our neighbors or the neighborhood since the incident. It became clear to me that our primary relationship with one another was that of rules, and we could expect in the future to hear first about transgressions, not about well-being. No one approached us to ask if we needed help. No one gave us the benefit of the doubt to see why it was we were unable to comply at this stage of our life. Any imagined relationship I had with this neighbor or frankly the neighborhood, had become a legal arrangement to be parsed, implemented, and brought into compliance.

In the well-known gospel passage today of the Good Samaritan, we begin with a lawyer. He is approaching Jesus from a position of hostility and not relationship. We are not given any indication that he is interested in getting to know and understand what Jesus' view of the spiritual life entails. But, even with that, there is a sense that they agree on the basics.

They both know that to inherit eternal life requires a life of action as well as words. Deeds aligned with principles.

But where they diverge pretty quickly is in how to ask the question of when and where to intervene.

Despite the lawyer's hostility, I am willing to give the lawyer the benefit of the doubt that his pushing to define who should be categorized as the neighbor is a reasonable question. I am rather well known in my family for generating endless scenarios, often dire, and imagining how I would and should respond in each of them. But even with a pretty good imagination, in the abstract, it is hard to generate every possible scenario in advance. Thinking about it ahead might help us respond in the moment, but it is rarely sufficient. Principles are helpful, but only in how they form us day after day, situation after situation.

Jesus quickly changes the question from the abstract to the concrete. He asks us to imagine a scene and see not who we should approach, but who in their response embodies compassion. It is in that moment, that who is neighbor becomes obvious, regardless of their role or status in the community.

In early June of this year, Erika Brannock was released from the hospital. She was the last of those injured in the Boston Marathon bombing to go home. She left after eleven surgeries and fifty days in the hospital. She is forever changed by the event, but has retained a resilience of spirit that is tangible.

When she was released one of her main hopes was to find the woman she credits with saving her life. The day of the marathon she was standing near the finish line when the bombs went off. Erika was there to see her mother run, another woman, a stranger, nearby was there to support a daughter. In the immediate aftermath of the bombing, Erika was seriously injured, and needed help. A woman she had never seen before, came to her aid. Erika heard her say, "My name is Joan from California, and I am not going to let you go." She was wearing a yellow sweater.

The women laugh about it now, because her name was actually Amanda. Amanda though Erika's name was Irene. But Amanda kept her promise, using her shirt as a tourniquet, and holding Erika's hand until she was safely at the hospital.

In the confusion following, neither woman knew what had become of the other. CNN put out the word that Erika wanted to meet the stranger who had saved her life. Amanda's friends heard about the search and told her. So CNN arranged to fly Amanda from California to meet Erika in Baltimore. They were both a little nervous about the meeting.

Amanda said, "In a way, she's a stranger to me, but when you share things like this you feel like you've known someone your entire life."

When they were reunited, neither woman said anything, they embraced and cried. Erika was able to say thank you and Amanda was assured that the woman she had helped was going to be okay.

It is the reunion I always wondered whether the man by the road and the Samaritan were able to have. Because while we know the Samaritan is able to act with compassion in the moment, we also know the Samaritan provides help and continues on his journey.

And whether we have a moment between Amanda and Erika, or the Samaritan and the injured man on the road, we see in this instance a much broader view of their character. To love our God with all our heart, and with all our mind, and with all our soul, and our neighbor as ourselves is not a formulaic approach to how to live life in each scenario we find ourselves in. We cannot prepare ahead of time for the person on the side of the road or a roadside race that becomes a scene of violence in a moment.

We can cultivate a posture of compassion. It is accomplished through the tiny decisions and experiences in daily life. And yes principles help us get there. But they are just a start. We have to cultivate a look on the world that seeks the neighbor so it becomes so much a part of who we are that in those unexpected moments, we respond as we would hope we would. We will not even need to think about it, because it will be who we are. Our ability to do the right thing in the moment, springs from the depths of who we are.

And it is a journey to get there. It is not about being perfect. To be the Good Samaritan means we have to recognize that we are each person in the story. It is that wholeness that allows him to show mercy and draw near to the beaten man.

We are the Good Samaritan when we know our self as the injured person on the road. We will have known our own vulnerability when the people we expected to stop left us for dead and we were helped by other sources of strength.

We are the Good Samaritan when we know our self as the priest and the Levite who crossed to the other side of the road in the past. We will have sought forgiveness and reconciliation for our lack of compassion.

We are the Good Samaritan when we see ourselves in the lawyer who starts from a position of defensiveness and finds the question changed altogether. It is then we can follow the direction of Jesus.

"Go and do likewise."

Amen