

## Showing Mercy

Luke 10:25-37

*Ute Molitor, First Congregational UCC in Camden, Maine; July 14, 2019*

Amina Amdeen and Joseph Weidenknecht met each other at an Anti-Trump rally and march in Austin, Texas, shortly after the 2016 election. Amina, a Muslima who had originally come from Iraq, was there to protest against Trump. She was wearing her hijab/headscarf and spoke passionately in protest against anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant statements that had been made during the campaign. Joseph, on the other hand, was there wearing his “Make America Great Again” hat, a campaign shirt, and held up a sign saying “Proud to be Deplorable” in reference to a comment Clinton had made during the campaign. Call him a counter protester.

The march proceeded peacefully but eventually some marchers took offense at Joseph and his message and crowded in on him. Amina was noticing this. About three people were talking at Joseph, tugging on his shirt. Then Joseph heard the click of a cigarette lighter next to his ear and realized that they were about to set his shirt on fire. Before he knew it, someone else reached out to grab his cap off his head. That’s when Amina intervened. Here is how she described her response, “... something kind of snapped inside of me because I wear a Muslim hijab and I’ve been in situations where people have tried to snatch it off my head. And I rushed towards [him] and I just started screaming ‘Leave him alone! Give me that back!’ Amina got people to back off and leave Joseph alone.

The story did not end there. Amina and Joseph stayed in touch with each other and decided to share their story through the “Story Corps Radio Hour” radio program called *One Small Step*, featuring people who have found a way to be in relationship and communication despite their differences. Joseph acknowledged that Amina was the only Muslim person he had actually ever met and that much of his thinking had been shaped by what he heard and read via the particular media he trusted. So he asked her to share more about her experience of growing up as a Muslima. She had come to the US from Baghdad at the age of 10 and stood out in school as the only Muslim girl and the only person wearing a headscarf. Amina talked about the many

misconceptions people have about Muslims. She shared about her daily life and said that Muslims have varied tastes like everyone else from music to food to politics.

When Amina asked Joseph about growing up, he spoke of being homeschooled and, in his particular case, having very few friends. He attended public school one year, got into three fights and, as he said, "I lost them all." His own political convictions have continuously left him feeling on the margins and this particular election had brought an end to a number of friendships. Amina and Joseph may well still disagree about many things but they share the conviction that it is not OK to harass or endanger someone for the stance they are taking. They also agree that we all have to invest more in building relationships with people we might disagree with. Their relationship has changed them further as getting to know each other challenged many projections and assumptions. I bet you that if Joseph saw Amina threatened by someone, he would stand by her side as well.

Their witness is important on a number of levels. I am sharing their story today because it also relates to the story about the so-called Good Samaritan. More on that in a minute. Let's remember the context for the Gospel story. A lawyer (which equaled "scripture scholar" at the time) is trying to test Jesus to see how orthodox (teaching the right message) Jesus is. The lawyer asks: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" As was a good Rabbi's habit, Jesus points the question back at the man and asks him what the law of Moses says. The lawyer answers piously by reciting the *shema* – a prayer as central to a Jew as the Lord's Prayer is to Christians: "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 approves and says that these words are key to living a life in touch with eternity.

The lawyer does not let the matter rest, however. The text says that he wants to "justify" himself by asking Jesus to define who qualifies as a neighbor. The word "neighbor" is fascinating to me. It literally means "born near." We tend to speak of neighborhoods and associate the people in a certain geographical area near us as our neighbors. Originally that

meant people literally born near each other. Nowadays, most of us are “from away,” as native Mainers like to say but we still like to praise our neighborhoods. Luckily, Mark and I live in a neighborhood in which people try to connect with each other.

The lawyer wants Jesus to define who the neighbor is so that the lawyer can feel OK in his boundaries about whom he is or is not responsible for. Having such clarity will allow him to feel justified around the active choices he will make in relation to his neighbors and those he will not include in the definition. Again, teacher that Jesus is, he answers the lawyer with a story that will turn the man’s question inside out and his worldview upside down.

We start with an unnamed traveler who is assaulted, robbed and left for dead on a dangerous road not too far from Jerusalem. A priest and a Levite<sup>1</sup> who are on their way to Jerusalem, and perhaps to service at the Temple, pass the man by without really even investigating his status. Their need to preserve their own ritual purity for performing sacrifices in an edifice has presumably become more important than caring for a person in need. Touching a corpse or blood would have rendered them unclean. It seems that they have turned their own religion into a lifeless transaction rather than the anchor and guide to the vulnerable and engaged life implied in the *shema*. The seemingly justified representatives of the lawyer’s tribe fail in the story.

The next person on the scene is a Samaritan (a person from the region of Samaria). Samaritans were a kind of historical cousin to Jews, but viewed with contempt and enmity because of several differences in cultural and religious practice. Our story is touching in the detail of care shown by the Samaritan. He soothes the wounds of the man with oil and even disinfects them with wine. He puts the man on his own animal and walks beside him. He looks for help and gives an innkeeper two day’s wages for to care for the man and promises to come and follow up to pay more if needed. The Samaritan leaves no stone unturned and aids someone in need without regard to the man’s background. He defies all stereotypes and expectations.

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<sup>1</sup> Levites performed rituals in the Temple.

After telling the story, Jesus has a question for the lawyer. “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” The lawyer faces the conundrum that the “hero” of the story is his own enemy. Beyond coming at the story from the vantage point of taking action on behalf of a neighbor, I wonder if Jesus might also be asking the lawyer to experience the story from the position of the ethnically unidentified man in need. “Who was a neighbor **to him?**,” Jesus asks. What is the view from the ditch so to speak (as Gerald Forde did in a book I cannot locate)? Can the lawyer only answer his question about who his neighbor is if he is also willing to ask, “What might it be like to be the one experiencing harm and being left for dead?”

Amina and Joseph were enemies on a surface level but they also shared the experience of ridicule and attack. Amina became something of a “Good Samaritan” in part because she could relate. Their common experience helped forge a relationship which in turn has the power to transform and overcome additional boundaries. Of course, we hope that people come to each other’s aid completely regardless of the specifics of the situation and identity of a person. However, this story has the important element that an “enemy” becomes a neighbor. If we miss that offensive aspect of the story, we miss part of the message. What I would like to stress here today is that Jesus is focusing on our existentially shared common ground. This common ground becomes even more fertile ground for action when we can come to each other in a spirit of compassion beyond our own ego boundaries and need for control.

In David Brooks’ book *The Second Mountain* (which a group of us is reading), Brooks quotes the poet W.H. Auden’s rendition of part of the *shema*, “... love our crooked neighbor with all your crooked heart.”<sup>2</sup> Auden and Brooks are highlighting that every one of us struggles to live up to our ideals. We all suffer. We all manifest contradictions and all have blind spots. Whenever we care for another from a place of presumed superiority or a safe distance, we are not yet loving our neighbor and not loving God whom we meet in the struggling neighbor.

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<sup>2</sup> W.H. Auden quoted in David Brooks, *The Second Mountain*(Random House: New York), 2019, 74.

Whenever we try to limit who our neighbor is to start with, we are missing the boat on the radicality of Jesus message (radix=root).

Thankfully, the lawyer in our story catches on and says that the one who showed mercy truly was as a neighbor to the one who was hurt. The word mercy is related to mercantile which has everything to do with regulated (or not) exchanges and quid pro quo. Mercy, however, undermines this very meaning and opens wide the doors of care beyond notions of meritocracy and deserving or participating in the right ritual (priest/Levite). To come back to the original question of the lawyer. Eternal life is not something for which we earn a ticket for our afterlife by good behavior. Eternity is by definition unbound by time. Therefore, it is not something that begins after we die but is always and already present. Whether we tune into it or not is another question. I get the sense that we are tuned in when we can embrace that we are all born near each other as children of God. And it might just be our supposed enemy who might convert us by coming to our aid. Let us give God thanks for the wisdom of our shared need for love and mercy that we may learn to love our crooked neighbor as our crooked self.