

Who Is The Other?

Text: Micah 8: 6-8; Luke 10: 25-37

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It was the same sidewalk, the same city block, the same time of day, the same kind of weather. In fact, everything was the same except for the person at the center of the story.

It started with a graduate-level course in New York City and a question posed by a professor to her Social Work class: Does appearance matter when it comes to helping others? The class engaged her with lively banter and discussion. And then she sent them out to search for on-the-ground-living observations.¹

And so it was. One of them dressed as a businessman donned for success in a well-groomed suit, clean-shaven and dapper. He was juggling his briefcase with a laptop while trying to navigate the busy sidewalk on crutches. Predictably and planned, he took a tumble, dropped everything, landed hard and appeared completely dazed and helpless. People immediately stopped to help him, three and four at once. They lifted him up, collected his belongings, and got him back on his way. This was replicated five times with very similar results.

Another afternoon now on the same sidewalk. This time one of them dressed as a homeless man wearing an oversized hoodie. He was carrying a plastic bag overflowing with empty cans with which to barter his next meal. He also held in the balance a tattered bedroll on which he would sleep. He, like the businessman, was on crutches and struggling. And he, like his counterpart the day before, took a public tumble. The first time no one stopped at all to help. It was the same the second time. The third time two people stopped to look, one of them talking on a cell phone. Finally, one bystander stopped to help. It was another street person without a home.

Does appearance matter when it comes to helping others? It's a very good question. Timely. Poignant. Who gets the arms of compassion and who is passed by? What identifies one circumstance or person as "other" and what signals "one of us?"

Jesus was once asked a question: "Who is my neighbor?" This was in response to his reminding those listening that day of the great commandment, which is grounded in a trinity of love: toward God, toward others, toward ourselves.

It was a lawyer who asked so we can make some assumptions. For one, we can surmise that he was educated far beyond the expected norm of first century Palestine. He had become a master of the civic and moral code of his own time and place. He held a place of privilege. But we also know that his asking wasn't entirely innocent. His question was to justify himself . . . his behavior, his life, his perspective, his position.

Jesus responded with one of the most famous parables of all time. “A certain man was traveling from Jericho to Jerusalem and he fell among robbers.” You remember, right? It’s the story of the Good Samaritan. And we all know how it turns out, right? Those who we imagine would stop and help did not. And the least likely to care at all let alone respond did both. He bound up the wounds, brought him to a place to heal, and financed his recovery.

Professor Stan Saunders of Columbia Theological Seminary writes: “Be wary of interpretations of parables that work to our advantage.”ⁱⁱ When we claim kinship with the hero in the story, the Samaritan, there is a very good chance that we missed the point that Jesus was making.

“Who is my neighbor, my sister, my brother? Which do you think?” The answer came back, “The one who showed mercy.” And Jesus said, “Go thou and do likewise.”

The question of Jesus in this teaching circles through time and back again. It came to me as I read the Hartford Courant just a week or so ago. This whole conundrum of who is our neighbor . . . who do we care for . . . who do we help up when they fall on the street, metaphorically or literally – is still here and breathing today.

And I wonder of all of us in these times: Does the appearance of the “others” we come upon cause any hesitation in our responding to their need? Does race play in, or ethnicity, or political alignment, or gender, or religion, or manner of dress?

The article was titled: “Beneath My Headscarf, I’m As American As You,”ⁱⁱⁱ written by a Muslim student at UCONN, Madiha. She told of traveling for the holidays and waiting at O’Hare in Chicago for a flight back to Bradley in Hartford. Her words, “As I waited I notice a woman staring at me. Her eyes would not budge. I looked up at her and smiled, but she wouldn’t look away. She did not smile back. I knew I stood out because I was wearing a headscarf which identified me as Muslim.”

“How could I let her know I’m just an ordinary UCONN student? I am an American Muslim who worries about the same things that all young people worry about. But wherever I go I feel like a thorn among roses. The media portrays me as a potential danger and a threat. The anti-Muslim rhetoric surrounding me makes me question my own identity. I am an American. I am a Muslim. But the culture today is telling me that these two identities don’t belong together. That they are not compatible.”

“Like a rising tide in the night, fear rises. People begin to paint all of us in the Muslim community with the same brush, assuming that all Muslims are dangerous people.”

Here’s the pinch for all of us today. Sometimes I end a sermon saying something like, “let me let it rest here today.” But I can’t do that with any integrity this morning

because I am not at all at rest. None of us are. We are all restless and these are restless times.

There are racial tensions and realities just beneath the surface of every day. Hard to imagine – this is 2016! So many of us thought we had resolved such issues long ago. But the evidence is hard to refute. There are tensions of and about the other, whosoever the other might be. There are assumptions and misunderstandings that run deeper than our conscious awareness. Discrimination, suspicion, distrust, reticence, and outright fear if not xenophobia are not far away.

And yet. This is no small thing. God made us one family, one people, one earth, one home; brothers and sisters riding this planet together. Different in color and language and ethnicity; in perspective and belief and identity; in orientation and capacity and gender. Diverse in more ways that we thought we ever knew, and alike in more ways than we truly grasp.

Yet still we wonder how to take care of one another, and our earth; still we wonder about the limits of compassion; still we wonder about how to show mercy and love our neighbor as ourselves.

So let me leave you restless, that I not be alone in such thoughts. These are tumultuous times and very large matters. May our common restlessness somehow find its way to the shalom, the salaam, the peace that eagerly await all of us deep in the heart of God. Amen.

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- ⁱ Google “Does appearance matter when helping others?” and view the YouTube answer gathered in January 2015 by graduate students in New York City.
- ⁱⁱ Stan Saunders, “Reflections on the Lectionary” in *Christian Century*, October 1, 2014, p. 21.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Madiha Shafqat, “Beneath My Headscarf, I Am As American As You” in Hartford Courant, Op-Ed, January 10, 2016.