

STUDY FOR JOURNEY GROUPS OR INDIVIDUALS
Sunday, March 8, 2015

Jesus and Justice: Showing Compassion Toward Social Outsiders

Our world can be an unkind place. Caste systems have many configurations. Social judgement parades with many faces. The disfigured, the physically disabled, the mentally handicapped and even kids who are bullied on school playgrounds can be victims of injustice without being guilty of anything but being themselves. They are outsiders. They are simply excluded. And their unjust exclusion is humiliating.

Historical Dilemma: Lepers

In Jesus' day, lepers were victims of discrimination through no fault of their own. They were social outsiders. Their bodies attacked with skin lesions that physically disfigured their limbs and eyes, lepers were subjected to social segregation. They were excluded.

In Old Testament times, one of the most famous lepers was Naaman. A man of prominence, the "captain of the host of the king of Syria, was a great man with his master, and honourable, because by him the Lord had given deliverance unto Syria: he was also a mighty man in valour, but he was a leper" (2 Kings 5:1). And as a leper, even Naaman was required to shout out "unclean, unclean" when people approached him.

Encountering God in the Biblical Story

- Read the three texts below consecutively and out loud
- Without any discussion, read the passages in silence and let the text speak to you
- Ponder your thoughts in silence
- Share your thoughts with each other, without discussion
- After everyone has shared, invite each person to make one concluding comment

When Jesus had come down from the mountain, great crowds followed him; and there was a leper who came to him and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean." He stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, "I do choose. Be made clean!" Immediately his leprosy was cleansed (Matthew 8:1-3).

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well" (Luke 17:11-19).

A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, "If you choose, you can make me clean." Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!" Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, saying to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them" (Mark 1:40-44).

Reflect on this statement:

Compassion is motivated by empathy. It generates behaviour that sees life from the other person's point of view. True compassion generates responses that open doors for outsiders to become insiders.

Jesus and Justice: Dignifying Second-Class Citizen

"Who is my neighbour?" is a troublesome and complex question. The neighbour dilemma is especially thorny when it is linked to justice issues that involve a sense of responsibility for other people's predicaments. The encounter between Jesus and the lawyer that prompted the parable of the Good Samaritan is a starting place for us to unravel the complexities (see Luke 10:25-37).

Let's be clear. In both Old Testament and New Testament terms, "loving your neighbour as yourself" is not about cultivating the art of reciprocal living. The "you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours" maxim doesn't qualify. If you invite me to your house for dinner and I reciprocate by inviting you to my house, I still fall short. Instead, it is helpful for us to define neighbours with an external viewfinder. Specifically, neighbours are "anyone within reach of our 'make a difference' compassion." Neighbours are not just anyone from anywhere. They are people within tangible reach of our compassion. The challenge from Jesus is to realize how widely our compassion can reach.

Reach beyond self-interest: Self-interest-only living is for whiners. If the parable of the Good Samaritan teaches us anything, it is that self-interest is exchanged for the best interests of “the other.” The Christian meaning of neighbour turns our eyes and ears outward.

Historical Dilemma: Neighbours

History offers us many reasons to celebrate but it is also marked with a lack of neighbourliness that has scarred our humanity with exploitation and abuse.

Jesus lived in a class-structure culture where discrimination was rampant. Religious leaders were part of the upper-class structure. Samaritans were victims of discrimination. Full participation in the community of faith was restricted to the members of one ethnic family. And in the midst of that social milieu, Jesus was a cultural disrupter.

During his years of ministry, Jesus attained some social prominence. There was countryside talk about this new prophet. Jesus’ teaching caused a stir. His miracles made headlines. Messiah rumours began to circulate. Jesus was more careful and calculating than in previous days. And again, he can be found in a public forum, this time interacting with a lawyer.

In the biblical account, it is the lawyer who asks the first question, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus fields the question with a two-part response. “What is written in the Law? What do you read there?” Taking the bait and seeing an opportunity to parade his knowledge of Scripture, the lawyer recites the right answer. Displaying keen intellect, the lawyer and Jesus continue their verbal sparring. Jesus then seizes the situation for a remarkable teaching moment by telling a story about the Good Samaritan.

The impact of the parable is profound. Jesus’ own people are the target audience. His cultural inheritance makes him fully aware of the ethnic tension between the Hebrew people and the Samaritans. He turns the prevailing social status upside down. The upper-caste priests and the Levite temple custodians are portrayed as the villains. The inferior-caste Samaritans are applauded for their superior moral behaviour.

Jesus’ words liberate the Samaritans from their second-class status. His parable confronts racial prejudice, elevates the marginalized and endorses religious practices outside of tabernacle rituals. In a radical fashion, the doors to the community of faith are opened to more than just one ethnic people. The prevailing notion that God loves one race or class more than another is defeated. Jesus’ actions announce that all peoples are loved by God.

Encountering God in the Biblical Story

Listen carefully as the text is read out loud

Without responding, take time to reflect in silence

Have the three people re-read the encounter. As they do so, identify one observation to share with the group

Share your observations with each other

The Parable of the Good Samaritan

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the Law? What do you read there?” He answered, “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 neighbour as yourself.” And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbour?” Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise” (Luke 10:25-37).

Identify and Do

Responding to the needs of neighbours is inconvenient and it can be costly. “Loving your neighbour” involves the precious currencies of both time and money. Paradoxically, it is often the case that people who have time do not have money and those with money often lack time.

Which currency do you value more? Between time and money, which is easier for you to release?

Choose a person who is struggling. Identify a situation that arouses your compassion. Decide to do something tangible to express your concern.