

Schooled By The Samaritan

It was a damp, gray, cold December afternoon.

Nothing at all like the weather today.

I told some kids from the after school program

That I would take them out to the Pizza Hut lunch buffet over Christmas Break,

And today was the day.

So, I fired up the church van,

And began picking the kids up.

First, I picked up Eric Medina at 206 Balair St,

Then I went to get Elijah Loudin who lived on James Street,

Then I picked up Ryan Gordon, then Junior Venegas,

then Leo Huerta and his brother Ito Huerta,

Then Ryder Hynes and Bryce Rivera.

Before I knew it, the van was full.

It was me and 8 middle schoolers in the church van,

headed to the Pizza Hut Buffet

On a dreary December afternoon.

The plan was to eat pizza,

Then come back to the church and play dodgeball, soccer, and football in the gym.

The music was bumping,

The kids were laughing,

Spirits were high.

Smiles were abundant.

Joy and middle school boy odor was in the air.

As soon as I parked,

The boys flooded out of the van and into the Pizza Hut.

We were seated by the sole waitress who was working.

Her eyes screamed that she was being overworked,

And her shoulders only tensed when she saw our rambunctious crew coming into chow.

“Uhh, we can put you in the back corner,”

She said bluntly,

Clearly trying to get our walking circus of chaos on the periphery of the Pizza Hut.

So we were seated in the back corner,

And the boys shot out of a cannon and into line at the buffet.

Ryan and Elijah grabbed a mountain of breadsticks,

Eric and Junior piled piece after piece of pizza on their plates,

Absolutely nobody went to the salad line.

Everyone was eating like it was their last meal.

We will return to this story a little later.

For now,

Let's turn to our gospel reading:

It comes from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 10:25-37.

Hear the Word of the Lord from the book that we love:

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus.

“Teacher,” he said,

“What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Jesus said to him,

“What is written in the law? What do you read there?”

He said,

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul,

With all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.”

Jesus said to him, “You have given the right answer,

Do this and you will live.”

But the man wanting to justify himself asked,

“And who is my neighbor?”

Jesus replied,

“A man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho,

And fell into the hands of robbers,

Who stripped him,

Beat him,

And left him half dead.

Now by chance, a priest was going down the same road,

But when he saw the man,

He passed by on the other side.

So, likewise, a Levite was going down the road,

But when he came to the place and saw him,

He passed by on the other side.

But a Samaritan while traveling

Came near to the man and when he saw him,

he was moved with pity.

He bandaged his wounds,

Having poured oil and wine on them.

Then he put him on his own animal,

Brought him to the inn,

And took care of him.

The next day,

He took out two denarii

And gave them to the inn keeper and said,

“Take care of him, when I come back I will repay you whatever you spend.”

Which of these three was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?

He said,

“The one who showed him mercy.”

Jesus said to him,

“Go and do likewise.”

This is the Word of the Lord,

Thanks be to God.

This is a familiar story to many of us.

So familiar, that we may neglect the very heart of the parable.

I want to suggest that

This parable is a parable about proximity.

To understand how this is a parable about proximity,

we first have to understand the setting of this parable:

The Jericho road.

The parable starts with,

“A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho

When he fell into the hands of robbers,

Who stripped him,

Beat him,

And left him half dead.”

When I was in Israel Palestine two Januaries ago,

I had the pleasure to hike what is called the Jericho road.

Though, I would not classify it as a road at all.

I would classify it more as a narrow,

Rigid, jagged, treacherous intermediate to difficult hiking path.

We only hiked 2 miles of the road,

But all of us were thoroughly exhausted after we finished.

As we were walking the path,

To our right was a sharp and severe drop off into a chasm of a valley,

To our left were rugged, towering cliffs.

One biblical expert writes,

The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was a notoriously dangerous road.

Jerusalem is 2,300 feet above sea level; the Dead Sea, near which Jericho stood, is 1,300 feet below sea level.

So then, in somewhat less than 20 miles,

this road dropped 3,600 feet.

It was a narrow road, with rocky defiles,

and of sudden turnings

which made it happy hunting ground for bandits.”

In the fifth century,

Jerome, a historian, tells us the road was called “The Red or Bloody Way.”

This is a treacherous path,

And it's also a very narrow path.

No more than 10-12 feet across.

So,

When our story says that the Priest and the Levite

Went on the other side of the path,

It means that they tried to stay as far away from the body as possible,

By either tiptoeing on the path's edge that falls off into a deep chasm of a valley,

Or by hugging the rough, jagged Cliffside.

By "going on the other side of the road"

They are doing everything in their power to avoid the Samaritan,

And in turn,

Are actually putting themselves in greater danger.

This is a parable about proximity.

The first two characters,

Actively avoid the man who is hurting.

The people listening to the parable

would have expected these two men to be the hero of the story.

Priests were the mediators between the people of Israel and God;

They were seen as holy, dutiful, and pure.

The Levites were the people God had appointed to carry the ark of the Covenant

When the people of Israel were in exile.

They were the altar boys,

Quasi-priests,

Like seminarians.

So, when the Priest and the Levite both leave the man who was beaten,

Carefully dancing around his body on the cliff's edge to avoid him.

Then,

Along comes the Samaritan.

Here,

The crowd hearing the parable would have expected the villain to take the stage.

Samaritans were hated,

Reviled,

Despised.

They were viewed as impure Jews

Because they intermarried with people outside the nation of Israel.

But,

Jesus muddles the crowd's assumptions,

The text says,

“But the Samaritan while traveling *came near*

And when he saw him,

He was moved with pity.”

This is a parable about proximity.

The Greek word for neighbor in the text is literally an adverb,

Made noun,

That means the one close by.

The Samaritan is the only one who draws closer

to his suffering nearby neighbor.

This is a parable about proximity. (pause)

Martin Luther King Junior writes,

“The Priest and Levite were thinking, ‘if I stop, what will happen to me?’

The Samaritan asked, “if I don’t stop, what will happen to him?””

This is a parable about proximity.

The Samaritan came near, came next to, came beside.

The Greek verb that is translated “to see”,

More literally means to encounter, to take in, to sacredly behold.

Our ability to love our neighbor is directly tied to our capacity to truly encounter them.

Our ability to love our neighbor is directly tied to how open we are to entering into our neighbors world.

Our ability to love our neighbor is directly tied to our willingness to feel what our neighbor is feeling.

“The Samaritan came near,

And when he *saw him*

He was moved with pity.”

We cannot help, heal, revitalize, and restore a neighbor

Until we truly, wholly, fully, enter into their world.

This is a parable about proximity.

Frederick Buechner writes in his very first novel, *Godric*,

These beautiful words:

“What's friendship,

when all's done,

but the giving and taking of wounds?”

I might edit that to say,

“What's being a neighbor when all's done,

But the giving and taking of wounds?”

The first step to loving our neighbors is not dancing around them,

As the Priest and Levite do,

But embracing them,

And meeting them right where they are.

“The Samaritan *came near*”

So, it was a dreary December day,

The boys were feasting on garlicky breadsticks and piles of pizza.

It was towards the end of the meal,

And I asked the boys if they were ready to head back to the church,

To play games in the gym.

And I'll never forget this,

Eric Medina looked at me

And said,

“Alex, we need to visit Eli S.”

Then all the other boys,

In unison,

Said,

“Alex, we HAVE to!”

“C'mon!”

Eli was a boy who came to our after school program,

Who got hit by a car,

Right before Christmas break.

He suffered a broken foot,

And a very bruised ego.

I was hesitant.

I didn't want to bring 8 12 and 13 year old boys

To see a kid who just got hit by a car.

I thought that would do more harm than good,

Especially given how hyper and full of energy the boys were.

But,

Their pleading convinced me.

So,

We piled back into the van,

And we headed to Eli's house,

Which was right down the street from Pizza Hut.

When we got there,

The boys respectfully and quietly entered into the clear glass door,

I went in behind them,

And saw Eli,

who was sitting on the couch,

His broken foot elevated

And in a big bulky brace and cast,

His eyes glued to the TV

As he was playing a video game.

When we all got in,

He paused the game,

And each of the boys, one by one,

Went over to the couch,

gave him a firm bro hug,

“We’re here for you bro.”

“We love you, man”

“We hope you feel better, dude.”

As many of them as possible sat right beside him on the couch,

And the rest that didn’t fit sat on the floor right next to him.

Loving your neighbor means drawing near (Pause)

“The Samaritan came near.”

The boys drew near to Eli.

This is a parable about proximity.

So,

What neighbors in our own proximity might we draw near to?

Who, in our community, has fallen into the hands of robbers,

Are barely hanging on,

And needs someone to come alongside them?

Maybe it’s Veterans at the VA? (Pause)

Maybe it’s the folks who struggle with food insecurity at the soup kitchen? (Pause)

Maybe it's a group of people

that we have not yet come alongside as a church. (Pause)

Maybe it's coming alongside your next door neighbor,

Who is mourning the loss of a loved one, (Pause)

Or your co-worker who is struggling through a messy divorce. (Pause)

How might the example of the Samaritan

Stir us and spur us

to come near, draw near, come close

And truly encounter the pain of our neighbor,

So we can love them through the pain and into healing?

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,

Amen.