

THE NEEDY NEMESIS

Messy (Part 5) | Luke 10:30-37

I read recently of a man who, while walking along a pier, tripped over some rope, and tumbled headlong into the water below. No more than 30 feet away, a man who happened to be an excellent swimmer, heard the desperate cries below him. Yet he sat motionless in his lounge chair, reading a book, until long after the man below gave one last gasp, and sank to his watery death.

While staying with a friend at Alta, Utah, the famous author, Vladimir Nabokov, returned from a day's excursion collecting butterflies. He told his host that while in pursuit of a winged prey near Bear Gulch, he had heard someone groaning piteously down by the stream. "Well, who was it?" the friend asked. "I have no idea," Nabokov replied. "I didn't stop. I had to get that butterfly." The next day the corpse of an aged prospector was discovered in what has since been renamed -- Dead Man's Gulch.

Now, let me point out an important fact: No earthly court ever tried and convicted these people for doing wrong. You see, while there are plenty of laws that prohibit someone from doing damage – unless you are contractually obligated for the care of another -- there is no authority on earth that compels you to take the active step to meet a need that Scripture calls "compassion." No one can make you row your lifeboat back to pick up a drowning soul. No one can require you to stop your car to help an accident victim or to treat your neighbors with lovingkindness. No one can force you to share the gospel of salvation with a non-Christian or finance the ministries of God's kingdom. No one can compel you to befriend someone who is lonely or confused, or feed the homeless, or support someone going through the pain of illness or loss. The Bible says that there is a higher court and law to which we have to answer. But no human authority can prevent us from seeing someone in need -- and like that Priest or Levite in Jesus' parable -- simply choosing to **"pass by on the other side."**

That's because Compassion is one of those elements of character -- like courage or faithfulness -- which can't be legislated, and yet upon which the health of all societies ultimately depend. As the Nobel Peace Prize winner, Albert Schweitzer, once observed: Wherever there is lost the consciousness that every person is an object of concern for us just because he [or she is a creature of God], civilization and morals are shaken, and the advance to fully developed inhumanity is only a question of time.

That's why I don't want to waste our precious time today by speculating on why the people in Jesus' parable didn't turn aside to help. We're already familiar with the apathy of lounge-chair sitters, and the misplaced busyness of butterfly-chasers, and the fearful selfishness of lifeboat rowers. For that reason, I'd much rather focus our attention today on this amazing role-model that Jesus tells us about and whom history has dubbed, "The Good Samaritan." For if we could only learn to love NEEDY people a bit more like he does, there's no telling how many lives might turn around.

Jesus says that **a Samaritan, as he traveled, came to where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him.** Now that word "pity" is an interesting one. While I know that it has come to mean a sort of critical or condescending sympathy, that is not the meaning it had when this passage was written. The Greek word for "pity" is: "splanchnizomai." As I've explained before, this term comes from a root word implying motion in the innermost parts of body – the guts, as it were. In ancient times, the guts were thought to be the seat of the heart and will. To be **"moved with pity,"** then, really means to undergo a "turning" that begins within.

Anyone in the first century hearing Jesus tell this story would know that the Samaritan in this tale had obviously undergone a stunning, even shocking, turning of his heart. Why do I say that? Because Samaritans and Jews felt toward each other the way the average Hamas and Israeli soldier feel toward each other right now. They regarded each other as "nemeses." The word "Nemesis" was the name the Greeks gave to the goddess of vengeance. Over the years, this word came to be used to describe somebody who you regard as an enemy or arch-rival or someone upon whom you may wish to exact vengeance.

If the Samaritan in Jesus' parable had been looking at that Jew with his heart in the normal orientation, the only reason he would NOT have passed by him like the Priest and the Levite did would be in order to get close enough to spit on him or give him a further pounding while he was down! But Jesus suggests that the eyes of his heart were apparently turned in a different direction than the normal person's. He didn't see a nemesis anymore, so much as a needy person – a wounded creature in need of care.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran pastor whose dedication to standing against Hitler earned him imprisonment and then execution, was once asked how he could show such compassion to the very guards who persecuted him. His answer was remarkable. Bonhoeffer said: We must learn to regard people less in the light of what they do or omit to do, and more in the light of what they suffer.

I think that's true. I think that if we knew -- as God does perfectly -- the deep woundedness with which the people around us are living... if we knew all the beatings their souls have taken, the precious hopes and people that have been stripped from them... it would be a turning point in compassion for us. Ask God today to turn your heart's eye away from the masks that people wear and towards the wounds they bear. Do that honestly, and you may find that even if they've been difficult or dreadful or dismissible in the past – it may become just a bit easier for you to love them as Jesus loves them – to treat them not according to what they deserve but according to what they need when you meet them this week.

But let that be just the beginning. You see compassion also involves not just a turning of our heart but also a tending with our hands. Just saying "Awww" is not loving as Jesus loves. Compassion is a change in our actions as well as our feelings. In fact, changed actions often precede changed feelings. So, what sort of actions are helpful to

needy people? Well, it seems to me that the Samaritan in Christ's story models three practical ways we can act compassionately toward the needy people we meet.

Note that, first of all, Jesus says that **[The Samaritan] went to [the man] and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine.** In other words, he didn't try to do major surgery by the roadside. He simply administered some basic balm and bandaging.

The poet, Edgar Albert Guest, tells of a time when he received such care: "There came a tragic night when our first baby was taken from us. I was lonely and defeated. There didn't seem to be anything in life ahead of me that mattered very much. I had to go to my neighbor's drugstore the next morning for something, and he motioned for me to step behind the counter with him. I followed him into his little office at the back of the store. He put both hands on my shoulders and said: 'Eddie, I can't really express what I have in my heart for you. All I can say is that I'm sorry, and I want you to know that if you need anything at all, come to me. What is mine is yours.'"

Guest went on to write: "He was just a neighbor across the way -- a passing acquaintance. He may long since have forgotten that moment when he gave me his hand and his sympathy. But I shall never forget it -- never in all my life. To me it stands out like the silhouette of a lonely tree against a crimson sunset."

Friends, God doesn't ask us to perform major surgery on people. But let's not forget to administer some first aid. Don't ever underestimate the healing effect of a few words of affirmation or an arm around the shoulder. Write the unexpected note. Don't just say, "I'll pray for you." Stop and pray with and for the person right then and there.

I remember a couple who were very critical of my ministry and told me they were leaving the church because they weren't fed by my preaching. We were nemeses of sorts. But then I heard a few months later that their house had been destroyed by a fire. So I went over to their address. I found the couple walking dazed and utterly devastated through the ashes of their life. I pulled off the pair of leather gloves I was wearing and gave them to the wife. "Why are you giving me these?" she asked. "Because you are going to want to sift through the ashes to find out whether there is anything precious here that might have been spared." I knew that because when I was eighteen, my house had been ravaged by a fire. I knew that when you are needy, little things count. A few months later I ran into the woman in church. "You're still here?" I said. "Yes," the woman replied. "Your preaching has gotten better."

Sometimes, one ounce of action is worth ten pounds of preaching. Your words could be the oil... your tears the cleansing wine... your listening presence the bandage... your leather gloves the first aid that make a difference to a person in need – maybe even to a nemesis -- until the next part of the healing process takes over.

Jesus said that the Samaritan next **put the [injured] man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him.** In other words, the Samaritan took

the man to a place of convalescence and remained with him there for awhile. You and I can do the same. After we've offered first aid, our SECOND job is to get that person to a place of convalescence. Maybe it's a financial planner to help her or him sort out the mess. Perhaps it's a career counselor, a pastor or therapist. Perhaps it's one of the support or recovery groups, or one of the Bible studies or small groups our church provides. Maybe it's a worship service like this. If you can get that wounded person to a place of ongoing care and help, you'll be doing much more than applying band-aids. If you can, like the Samaritan, remain a little while and take care of him or her there, you'll vastly increase the chance he or she will stay.

Is the healing of another human being worth that much to you? It apparently was to the Samaritan in the story. Jesus said that he **took out two denarii** [two days pay for the average worker] **and gave them to the innkeeper. "Look after him," he said, and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.**" In other words, the Samaritan was willing to pay part of the price to redeem his nemesis. How about us? Mere politeness or checkbook charity can be a fairly low-expense endeavor. But genuine Christian compassion -- the kind that creates a turning point in the life of caregiver and care-receiver alike -- is not for wimps or misers.

It may cost you time and money to nurture and guide someone. It may cost some of your social esteem to associate yourself with a wounded person. It may cost you some comfort and cleanliness to roll up your sleeves and go to work in the emergency room of someone's life. It can cost your pride to do good to someone who has not done good to you. But this anyone who's been on the giving or receiving end of true compassion knows it is worth the price -- as this final story may help make clear.

One night a fire broke out in a house occupied only by an orphaned boy and his grandmother. The grandmother tried to get upstairs to rescue the little boy, but she was overwhelmed by the smoke and perished in the flames. A crowd gathered outside and listened helplessly as the boy's cries for help rose above the crackling flames that had, by now, completely engulfed the front of the house. Suddenly a stranger emerged from the crowd and circled to the side of the house. Clambering up an iron pipe bolted to the side of the building, the man scrambled through a window and disappeared from view. A minute later he emerged with the boy clinging to his back and neck. As the crowd roared, the man slid down the pipe and delivered the child to safety.

Weeks later a hearing was held to determine where the orphan would be placed. "The boy should go with me," said one claimant. "I have a big farm. A kid like this needs the out-of-doors." Another said: "I'm a teacher. I've got a whole library. Think of the education I could give him." Others spoke, until the richest man in the community silenced everyone: "I'm wealthy. I can give the boy everything mentioned tonight: a house, education, money, travel, and more." The crowd buzzed in approval, the matter seemingly all but settled.

And, then, one more voice rang out from the back of the room. "I'd like the child to be with me." All eyes turned toward the shabbily dressed stranger, who began walking

toward the front of the room. The magistrate presiding at the hearing inquired: "By what authority or advantage do you seek to claim the boy?" The stranger didn't speak a word. He just stopped in front of the child, looked tenderly at him, and slowly removed his hands from his pockets. The crowd gasped, for his hands were scarred with terrible burns, the kind one might get by climbing up and down a hot pipe to save someone's life. And, with a leap, the little boy threw his arms around the stranger.

Do you realize that, once upon a time, Someone else had his hands scarred for our sake too? Our sin had made us His nemesis. We couldn't get out of the ditch of death on our own. But moved with splanchnizomai (pity) at our need, his heart turned toward us. His hands stretched out for us. And he climbed up onto a cross and paid the price to save us from the flames.

None of us who truly grasp this story can ever be the same again. We want to throw our arms around Him. We want to be with Him for the rest of our lives. And when we come to those places on life's road where we meet some other needy soul – even a nemesis – we don't just walk on by. We start looking for the oil. We start peeling off our gloves. We do something to act with compassion to try to fill a need. Because even though it is MESSY, that is how Jesus loves. How about you?

Let us pray...

Jesus thou art all compassion, pure unbounded love thou art, visit us with thy salvation, enter every trembling heart. Finish then thy new creation, pure and spotless let us be, let us serve thee without ceasing, use this people and use me. Amen.