

# ***Our Diminishing Capacity to Care***

Luke 10:25-37

One of the things I'm thankful for today is that I was not sitting on the jury for the trial of George Zimmerman, acquitted last night for the murder of Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida last year. If I had been, they might still be deliberating their decision!

Now that the verdict has come down, I must admit, I was both surprised and perplexed by the outcome. I think it's fair to say, there will be a nationwide reaction to it on both sides, not just due to George Zimmerman per se, but because it hits many of the hot-button issues: racism, the right to self-defense, fear of crime, gun laws, just to name a few.

I, like many of you, formed an opinion about what occurred in Sanford on February 26, 2012 based on the evidence reported. But then, we have to accept the jury's decision and their judgment on the evidence presented in this case. However, it does raise the larger issue of what standard of conduct should George Zimmerman's actions have been measured? What would we have expected him to do or not do as a law-abiding citizen in this society? This isn't just a legal determination.

Zimmerman's lawyers successfully argued that everything their client did was, not only legal, but appropriate, given the potential threat posed by the victim. That was the heart of their case. What was on trial here is the "Stand Your Ground" law enacted in Florida, where individuals have the right to protect themselves and use deadly force if they perceive they're being threatened. Over half of the states have some form of this "castle law" on their books, including our

neighboring states, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Maine. So we can anticipate other cases of this type arising from time to time.

Laws of this type, though, are inherently controversial. Proponents cite statistics which indicate a decrease in the level of murder in states with such laws.<sup>1</sup> Critics, however, note that the evidence is mixed, since the raw homicide rates have actually increased, and the amount of violence involving white males, in particular, has jumped.<sup>2</sup> The data seems to be what you make of it.

Yet, now that Zimmerman has been acquitted, does this then become a precedent and the standard by which we judge how people should act when encountering a stranger? Should “standing your ground” be the way we encounter people unknown to us? That isn’t just a legal debate; it’s a moral one, as well.

The moral side is illustrated in this way: what if George Zimmerman had chosen to avoid a confrontation with Trayvon Martin, or even better, had he shown a kindness to the stranger that walked through his neighborhood? It isn’t just a matter of legality; the more significant question is, what would have been the morally right and wise thing to do?

What if he hadn’t been inclined to view this 17-year-old boy suspiciously—profiling him as a threat—but instead considered him merely as someone walking through the neighborhood minding his own business? Or what if he saw Trayvon Martin as someone to whom he might have offered assistance, rather than presuming he

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<sup>1</sup> John Lott, *More Guns, Less Crime*, University of Chicago Press, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Joe Palazzolo, “Study Says ‘Stand Your Ground’ Laws Increase Homicides,” *Wall Street Journal Law Blog*, June 11, 2012.

was a neighborhood menace? Wouldn't that more charitable response have saved both of these lives? What does all of this say about our personal and social morality as Americans?

You see, I think the George Zimmerman trial reveals more about us as a society than we might realize. There's a culture of fear that erodes our ability to care for others. Ironically, in thousands of churches today, millions of Americans will be sitting in pews hearing the story of the Good Samaritan (the common lectionary text)! Yet, this obsession with fear is one of the reasons Good Samaritans are becoming the exception, rather than the rule, in our daily life. People, more often than not, fear strangers; even if they don't stand their ground, they may only reflect the actions of the priest and the Levite by walking on by, ignoring someone else's trouble. Fear and anxiety have a paralyzing effect on the natural impulse to reach out and help someone—freezing our actions and diminishing our capacity to care. And every time we allow our fears to dictate our actions, we lose a little more of our Godlikeness and the generosity of spirit that preserves our souls.

Now let's be honest. If fear were the only thing preventing us from being Good Samaritans, then you'd have all the good, moral people of America living in safe places like Noank, while the crime-riddled areas would be habited by the worst of society. But that's simply not the case (it's often the stereotype, but not reality). There are many other things that take the "Good" out of people, e.g., a bad attitude, meanness of spirit, callousness, indifference, anger, prejudice, resentment, bitterness. There's no redlining certain

neighborhoods when it comes to mean-spirited, nasty people—they're everywhere.

So are other factors, such as busyness, being rushed and in a hurry, preoccupation with other priorities and concerns, a life already filled with complications—all of these things make us unavailable to others in their times of need. We pass on by like the priest and the Levite because we haven't got the time or the availability to help someone.

Then, you have structural complications that get in the way, such as HIPAA laws, a concern about litigation, a lack of training or expertise to intervene. Helping others can be very complicated in our society. Even in the service and caregiving professions, we can become so saturated with other people's needs that we have no time, energy, or desire to take on one more person's problems. The same is true for those who are overwhelmed with responsibilities and family concerns that drain them and make them so weary that they have nothing to give to those outside of the home. Of course, if you have your own struggles, for all intents and purposes, you might not be any better off than the stranger left beside the road. There are times in life when we feel like we've been mugged and left us dying on the side of the proverbial road of life. So what I'm saying is, it's not only fear that diminishes our capacity to care. Many times, it's everything else. We're not able because we're not available. And we're not "Good," mainly because we're not well.

What then? What are we to do with this story of the Good Samaritan as an example of our moral conduct as Christians? Are we to add our excuses to the list of reasons for why being a Good

Samaritan is not such a good idea in our society? Do we simply follow the “common sense” rule for life and avoid helping strangers? That might be the approach some will take, but others of us will say—wait, isn’t the point of Jesus’ story to emphasize just how important this one moral act can be in regard to our embracing the meaning and intent of our faith? Wasn’t the proof of one’s love of neighbor demonstrated in how the Samaritan treated a stranger? The excuses we come up with, even with our worries and fear, aren’t enough to get us off the hook from helping people in trouble. Instead, we’re called to “stand our ground” for different reasons—for doing the right thing by being a true neighbor and friend.

What strikes me is that many of the reasons for our reluctance are embedded in this story, i.e., fear, vulnerability, ability, time. The Samaritan, of the three characters, had the most to worry about when traveling alone on the Jericho Road, which was notorious for bandits and criminal ambushes. For one thing, he wasn’t on his home territory, since Samaritans lived in Galilee and the Jericho Road was in Judea. It would be assumed he was traveling through as a merchant—the type the rogue bandits would look for and prey upon. Levites and priests, for religious reasons, didn’t carry much of material value on them. That was common knowledge. They, of anyone, wouldn’t have been targeted by thieves (not to mention, even thieves didn’t want to mess with men of God).

But the Samaritan would have been just perfect—an outsider, likely plenty of money, and few friends nearby to help him. So the Samaritan had every reason to fear for his life when helping this man

lying alongside the road! He was walking into the notorious trap of bandits.

So why do we think he stopped? He had every good reason and sensible excuse to hurry on by, to avoid a complicated and threatening situation, and (not being a local) to being relatively unqualified to help away from home. The only reason I can imagine he intervened is because somehow, in some way, *he must have known what it was like to be left by the side of the road uncared for by others!* Oh, it's possible that Jesus was construing him to be a remarkably generous and compassionate man—but I doubt it, since his Judean audience wouldn't have bought into that. Judeans didn't trust Samaritans, nor did Samaritans think much of Judeans. The message would have been lost if they thought he was only playing with their prejudices. Besides, even wonderfully compassionate people walk on by for all the various reasons I just mentioned.

I can only conclude that Jesus' intent in this story was to portray the Samaritan going against every reasonable, sensible, defensive, protective instinct in him because he somehow saw himself in the victim's place. If we read between the lines, maybe Jesus knew that Samaritans were often victimized along the Jericho Road and hence, he knew that it would take a victim to understand what it feels like to be left stranded along the road of life.

If that's true, then there's a powerful point being made. A moral "do-goodism" isn't enough to motivate people when fear takes over. You can cultivate all the desire to serve others in your heart, you can be the most moral person, but when fear is a factor, self-preservation almost always wins out. If you want to test that, ask

yourself: what would you advise your spouse, your son, your daughter, your grandchild, or someone else you love to do in that situation—help the stranger, or quietly and quickly walk on by? If my reading of human nature is correct, self-preservation and safety is the choice we make when we are apprehensive about what might happen.

When you're afraid, you either flee, or you convince yourself you'll overcome your fears by protecting and defending yourself. That's why we have "Stand Your Ground" laws—to legally provide the cover for people who face life-threatening situations. Allow them to face a threat armed and ready. But even the most trained and experienced among us are scared for their lives when they're in a risky situation—just ask a cop or a war veteran. Carrying a weapon is not enough when fear is still a factor. Certainly, you can throw compassion out the window. It's not there when you're facing down a potential adversary. That's a problem in our society.

What motivates compassion—the type that will take a risk—the type I believe Jesus was portraying in the Good Samaritan—is *empathy*—understanding and responding to the situation as if you were the victim. Empathy is what humanizes the circumstances; it takes you out of your own head and set of fears and into the place of the victim. It will lead you to stop and assess what needs to be done to help someone in need. It will place the concerns of the suffering person above your own in that moment of time. It will personalize the circumstances so that your heart will be haunted if you don't do all you can to help.

Empathy is the way divine mercy responds to human suffering and intervenes. Empathy is what motivated the Good Samaritan and

made him good; empathy for victims is what motivates us to do what is right when someone else is in trouble or, conversely, not to create trouble because of our fears.

Barbara Kingsolver says it well:

Empathy is really the opposite of spiritual meanness. It's the capacity to understand that every war is both won and lost. And that someone else's pain is as meaningful as your own.

That's what leads Good Samaritans to stop wherever the Jericho road is in their lives to help someone they don't know and whose circumstances are suspicious and possibly life-threatening. Empathy is one of the gifts God gives us so we will care for others as God cares for them.

I don't know if Jesus intended to make the Samaritan out to be good simply because Samaritans were often scorned and ridiculed by their racial rivals. I can't say what the lawyer thought after parsing out all of his moral and legal distinctions, when he asked Jesus, "And who, exactly, is my neighbor?"

But one thing seems clear to me: a moral response to help strangers is more incumbent upon us than we think and much harder to do than we imagine, because it's rooted more in our empathy with others than with our capacity to be kind. As it would for the Good Samaritan, all of this runs against our protective interests—our survival instincts as humans. But remember this: when we are willing to give up showing mercy toward strangers for the sake of security, then we will have all the more reason to fear for our survival. For that's a nightmarish world of Social Darwinism, where the primary objective is merely surviving.

If the George Zimmerman trial and verdict teach us anything, it's that we lose a great deal if we succumb to the fears of our time and avoid doing what is good for others, even those we perceive as threats or enemies. For it's our empathy that leads us to love our neighbors as Jesus taught and it's our fears that will only diminish our capacity to care. In a world with choices that appear so black and white, may we choose to do what's right and good, not only for our own benefit, but for the sake of us all.

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