

Be In Touch

Jim Benedict – Union Bridge Church of the Brethren
Sermon for Sunday, April 18, 2010, Luke 10 25:37

A state known for nurturing excellence in a wide variety of fields has just added another name to its long list of accomplished citizens. 15 year old Iowan Kate Moore beat out a quarter million other contestants to be crowned the fastest texter in the United States. Texting, for those who may not know, is typing out messages on your cell phone. Kate Moore managed to beat out 19 other finalists in the two-day competition that involved challenges such as texting blindfolded and texting while maneuvering through a moving obstacle course. The key to excellence, says Moore, is practice. She sends on average between 400 and 500 texts a day. Hopefully her parents, who pay the phone bill, were smart enough to get the unlimited texting package. Of course, Kate can always chip in her championship including a \$50,000 prize.

Texting is just one of several modern technological ways we communicate. Emails, instant messaging and cell phones allow us to be almost constantly in touch without being in reach of one another. And, to be honest, I'm not sure it is entirely a good thing. At first glance, it would seem that all the new communication technology would have the effect of opening up the world to us. But in certain ways, it has the tendency instead to close us off from the world. Instead of engaging in real face-to-face conversations with people who might have different opinions, we go to a chat room of like-minded folks. Instead of being alert and aware of and available to the people who are physically near to us – neighbors, fellow commuters, or the person who passes us on the sidewalk – we are isolated by our conversations with people far away. The new technology makes it easy to get wrapped up in our own little world and ignore the people around us.

Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan long before cell phones were invented. Nonetheless, the story shows us that ignoring others around us – though perhaps more difficult – was possible even then. Two individuals, a priest and a Levite, managed to walk right by the man in need. Only the Samaritan stopped to help.

But before we delve more deeply into the details of the actual story, let's set the context. Tradition holds that Luke, the author of the gospel, was not actually a disciple or eyewitness to the events he describes in the gospel. Rather, he was converted some time after the resurrection and became a good friend of the Apostle Paul. Thus, his knowledge of Jesus came from the stories he heard others tell. And as he went about putting together his – orderly account – of Jesus' life, he focused especially on stories that showed outsiders in a favorable light – women, the poor, tax collectors like Zacchaeus, Gentiles and Samaritans.

The story of the Good Samaritan is told in response to a question from an expert in the Jewish law. As we read, the man asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus' initial response is to point the man back to what he already knows: the commandments. The man properly identifies the first two commandments as, "Love God" and "Love your neighbor." Jesus says that's right. But the expert in the law isn't satisfied. The answer isn't precise enough for him. "Who is my neighbor?" he wants to know.

Who can blame the man for wanting some nice, clean categories? All he wants to know is where his obligations start and where they end. He lived in a world deeply divided by culture, religion and politics. Everyone knew they had obligations to their blood kin and members of their own clan. Naturally, there was a degree of concern and compassion for folks

in the neighborhood in a large city or the fellow citizens in a small village. But these folks were almost always of the same background and religion. So if these were the people meant by the term, neighbor, the commandment basically meant love your own and those like you. Was that good enough?

Jesus' story was the answer to that question, and the answer was, No. Loving your own and those like you is not what the commandment to love your neighbor means, and it isn't good enough to get you eternal life. Love must be stronger. Love must go further. Love must reach out beyond one's comfort zone, and touch the lives of those we are tempted to ignore and avoid.

By casting a Samaritan as the hero of his story, Jesus was really challenging the comfort zone of the expert in Jewish law. Jewish law and custom made plain that Samaritans were to be despised and avoided. To even touch a Samaritan would render a Jew ritually unclean—unfit for worship. There was a bitter rivalry, with both Samaritans and Jews claiming to be the more authentic descendants of Abraham and keepers of the traditions of Moses. The animosity was so great that Samaritans were cursed in synagogue prayers, deemed unfit to be witnesses in Jewish courts of law, and Jews were prohibited from even trying to convert a Samaritan!

A story with a Samaritan hero reaching out to help a stranger, probably a Jew, sent a very clear message—you can't define ahead of time who your neighbor is or isn't. Neighbors must be recognized in the moment of opportunity, when one is able to do something to help.

A colleague tells the following story. I was riding the subway one day when I noticed an old woman who shuffled into the subway wearing only ragged clothes to protect her from the bitter Chicago winter wind. Her white, cracked, bony hands clutched a worn shawl tightly around her. I watched with wonder and pity.

At the next stop, an energetic, obviously successful young man strode confidently on to the train. His warm, high-fashion clothes offered a stark contrast to the rider from the last stop. As he made his way to his seat, his eyes lingered just a moment on the old woman. Three stops later, as the train slowed, he glided by her to the other door and disappeared into the tunnel. When I looked back at the woman I saw that on the woman's lap lay his brown leather gloves.

The minister observed, I was surprised. For some reason, I had never imagined that such a sharp dressed, successful young person would give the least attention to that woman. I don't know if he was a believer in Christ or not. But I do know this: He saw her need and responded with compassion—while I just sat there. It never occurred to me to give her *my* gloves. That young man showed compassion in a way I'll never forget.

This, then, is the challenge that faces all of us. We are challenged to keep an open mind, and more importantly, an open heart. Neighbors are everywhere, if only we take the time and make the effort to notice. Neighbors are everywhere, if we don't approach life already convinced that some people can't be our neighbors because they are too different from us. Neighbors are everywhere, if we are willing to look and prepared to respond.

The Samaritan was willing to look and prepared to respond, even to risk. You see, the road from Jerusalem to Jericho was notorious for bandits, and one of their strategies was to have one person pretend to be injured near the road. And when someone stopped to help, the other bandits would come out from their hiding places and rob the kindhearted soul who had stopped. The Samaritan took that risk when he stopped to help.

The Samaritan was willing to look, prepared to respond, willing to risk and able to spend. He pours out his olive oil and wine, both valuable substances, to soothe and disinfect the man's wounds. Then he pays two days' wages and offers more, whatever the cost, on his return. All this for a man he doesn't know; for a man who was, until that moment, not his neighbor.

The story of the Good Samaritan not only reminds us that neighbors are everywhere and can be anyone. It also reminds us that neighborliness (or love of neighbor), at least the kind that the commandment calls for, is not limited to actions that are cheap, easy or convenient. If we want to love our neighbors in the way that the commandment asks, and in the way that makes us fit for eternal life, we must be willing to love even when it involves cost and risk.

Cost and risk, risk and cost. Come to think of it, there is no love of neighbor or anyone else without cost and risk. Even God's love for us involved the risk of placing humans in a world where they could be tempted and turn away from God. And God's love involved the cost of the cross, of suffering with and for us, that we might realize just how much we are loved.

Something tells me that the expert in the law got a lot more than he expected from Jesus. He asked what seemed like a simple, straightforward question: Who is my neighbor? And instead of a simple, straightforward answer, he got a story about how to be a neighbor when someone needs one, and how love always involves costs and risks. It was a lot to think about, I'm sure.

But notice one last thing. When Jesus is done teaching the man by means of this story, he asks the man which of the three passersby was the neighbor. And the man answers, The one who showed mercy. At that point, Jesus doesn't say, Good answer! You get an A. Jesus doesn't say, Go home and ponder these things in your heart. No, what Jesus says is simply, Go and *do* likewise.

That is the real point of the story, and the only real proof we've truly heard and understood it. And what Jesus asked of the man with the question about eternal life is the same thing Jesus asks of us. So then let us go and do likewise.

Amen.