

**“From the ditch” a sermon based on Luke 10:25-37 preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Presbyterian Church, Dunedin, New Zealand on 14 July 2019.**

The parable of the Good Samaritan became so well-known that it even influenced our law. Let me give an example.

On a public holiday, in the summer of 1928 May Donoghue went to the Wellmeadow café in Paisley Scotland with a friend. The friend bought her a bottle of ginger beer and an ice cream. The ginger beer came in a dark brown glass bottle as a result of which May could not see what was inside it. May poured half the contents of the bottle over her ice cream and drank some from the bottle. She ate part of the ice cream. Her friend then poured out the remaining contents of the bottle and as she did so, out flowed a decomposed snail. May claimed that as a result she got a stomach ache. She had to go to the hospital and she was diagnosed with severe gastroenteritis and shock. The ginger beer had been made by David Stevenson. May Donoghue sued David Stevenson for negligence. Every law student now knows about the famous 1932 case of Donoghue v Stevenson.

The case went through several levels of court until it ended up in the highest court, the House of Lords. And one of the Lords hearing the case was Lord Atkin, who had been born in Brisbane and grew up in the United Kingdom. Lord Atkin had been brought up in a family of faith and he knew the story of the neighbourly Samaritan.

Until this case, the law would have held that Stevenson would not have been liable because there was no contract between May and David. David did not owe May any duty.

Lord Atkin used the language of the story of the Good Samaritan to describe the duty David Stevenson owed to May Donoghue. By a majority of 3 to 2, the court held that there was a duty of care and so Stevenson was liable for the harm he had caused. The case established what is known as “the neighbour principle” and it applies to this day.

This is what Lord Atkin said ...

"The rule that you are to love your neighbour becomes in law you must not injure your neighbour; and the lawyer's question "Who is my neighbour?" receives a restricted reply. You must take reasonable care to avoid acts or omissions which you can reasonably foresee would be likely to injure your neighbour."

Like many, Lord Atkin treated the parable as having a simple moral, that we should care for our neighbour who is in need.

But this is a parable, and parables are not simple moral stories. Every parable has a bite, a twist, a shock or surprise.

If it had been a simple moral story, Jesus could have told how someone was hurt on the road, two people walked past, and a third person offered care. On this telling it is setting us an example to which we must aspire.

But parables are more than that. They often unnerve the person, question their approach, shift their understanding.

So who is Jesus addressing? A lawyer who is testing Jesus. Jesus answers by asking him to say what is written in the law. The lawyer answers accurately. Then the lawyer presses Jesus "in order to justify himself". Now few things seem to provoke Jesus more than people trying to justify themselves.

So the story is told to invite the lawyer into a different way of seeing the world, into a different set of relationships. The Samaritan is far outside the lawyer's circle of reference. The Samaritan is the one least expected to obey the law. The Samaritan is the one from whom the lawyer would least accept help. Yet the Samaritan is the one most able to help and the lawyer is the one most in need of help.

Jesus is inviting the lawyer out of his world of self-justifying and proving himself, into a world where he is stripped, beaten and left half dead.

Why?

Robert Wuthnow, a professor of sociology at Princeton University, once conducted research about why some people are generous and compassionate, while others are not. He found that for many compassionate people, something had happened to them. Someone had acted with compassion toward them, and this experience had transformed their lives.

For example, Wuthnow tells the story of Jack Casey, a paramedic. Casey had little reason to be a Good Samaritan. He was raised in a tough home, the child of an alcoholic father. He once said, "All my father ever taught me is that I didn't want to grow up to be like him."

But something happened to Jack when he was a child that changed his life, changed his heart. He was having surgery one day, and he was frightened. He remembers the nurse standing there and compassionately reassuring him. "Don't worry," she said to Jack. "I'll be here right beside you no matter what happens." And when Jack woke up again, she was true to her word and still there.

Years later, Jack Casey, now a paramedic, was sent to the scene of a road accident. A man was pinned upside down in his pickup truck, and as Jack was trying to get him out of the wreckage, petrol was dripping down on both of them. The rescuers were using power tools to cut the metal, so one spark could have caused everything to go up in flames. The driver was frightened, crying out how scared he was of dying. Jack remembered what had happened to him long ago on the operating table, how that nurse had spoken tenderly to him and stayed with him, and he said and did the same thing for the truck driver, "Look, don't worry," he said, "I'm right here with you, I'm not going anywhere." Days later, the rescued truck driver said to Jack, "You know, you were an idiot, the thing could have exploded and we'd both have been burned up!"

"I just couldn't leave you," Jack said.

Something had happened to Jack Casey that transformed him.

That is the point of Jesus' Parable of the Good Samaritan. What the lawyer discovered-and what we discover, too-is that we cannot stand on the sidelines and figure out how to be good, trying to justify ourselves and turn ourselves into compassionate people. For all of our religious virtues and attitudes, we just cannot do it. We are helpless to be Good Samaritans on our own strength.

In other words, we are the person in the ditch, the one who lies helpless and wounded beside the road, the one who needs to be rescued. And along comes a Good Samaritan, a Good Samaritan named Jesus - despised and rejected - who comes to save us, speaks tenderly to us, lifts us into his arms, and takes us to the place of healing.

So, the question is not the lawyer's, "What is the definition of 'neighbour'?" The question is who has been neighbour to you. Jesus Christ has been neighbour to you. The crucified one has been neighbour to you. Have you felt his mercy make your own heart merciful? Then in your heart you will know what this means: Go and do likewise.

Let us pray (a prayer adapted from Tom Long)

O God, when we are honest about ourselves, we know that we do not choose in our own strength to do what is right. We do not have the wisdom or the power in ourselves to be righteous. We lie helpless on the side of the road, and even our best moral instincts pass us by on the other side. Come to us, O God, come to us again in Jesus Christ. Lift us out of our brokenness and take us to the place of healing. Through Jesus Christ. Amen.

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