

Courage to Love in Fear-filled Times

The Parable of the Good Samaritan

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Parable we know as “The Good Samaritan” is the best known of Jesus’ parables. It is better than “The Prodigal Son,” if for no other reason than that most people talk only about the first half of that parable, the part about the younger brother being forgiven. I rarely hear anyone talk about how much they feel like the elder son.

We usually think of the parable of the Good Samaritan as parable about being kind and helpful to someone in need. It certainly is that. But Jesus’ fellow Israelites would have heard it, if they were not totally turned off by it, as a parable of courage. Being helpful does not always takes courage. But sometimes it does. And it certainly did in the case of the Samaritan.

First, this man is on an isolated road. How does he know that the man lying beside the road is not a setup for an ambush? When he goes up to see what is wrong, the man lying down might jump up and beat him up and rob him! Checking him out involves personal risk.

The Samaritan is clearly a rather wealthy traveller. Jesus probably has a merchant in mind as he makes up this parable. He owns a pack animal and he has enough baggage to need one! He has oil and wine, which are valuable commodities. And he has money – enough to give the innkeeper 2 days worth of wages and promise him more if the innkeeper spends more. He is just the kind of traveller the bandits that roamed those lonely hills were waiting for.

In 1970 I moved out of New York City after two years at Union Seminary. I rented a truck. New York at that time was a relatively dangerous city. I myself had been mugged by some teenagers. I deliberately went to a rental office just up the block from me. I was instructed I had to pay for it in cash when I picked it up. To my horror the truck was on the other side of Harlem, which at that time was particularly dangerous. I had to take a bus as a very conspicuous white guy travelling across Harlem carrying a lot of money in cash. I was not comfortable!

Back to the Samaritan: he is in not only dangerous territory but he going through territory belonging to the Judeans. The Judeans were cousins to the Samaritans, but not kissing cousins. They shared Israel’s religious heritage, but were seen as worse than pagans because they had contaminated that heritage so badly over the past 600 years. In other words they were traitors to the traditions of Israel. Traitors among your own people are worse than external enemies. The Samaritan probably sticks out like a sore thumb in Judaea by the way he is dressed as well as by his obvious wealth. Why was he travelling this route in the first place? Jesus leaves us to imagine. Whatever his reason, he is portraying for us a man of courage.

We are told that to get from Judea in the south to Galilee in the north, Judeans avoided going through Samaria the way anyone avoids going through a dangerous neighborhood. In fact, despite its dangers they avoided Samaria by taking the very route through Judea this Samaritan was taking. Jesus, in contrast, once felt compelled to go from Judea to Galilee *through Samaria*. The Evangelist John says, “he *had to* go through Samaria.” There he had his famous conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well. That defenseless woman was not happy about going by herself to the well. But she did so in order to avoid the gossipy women of the village who had nothing better to do than talk about her sex life. How unpleasant for her to go from the frying pan into the fire. She successfully avoided gossipy women only to be confronted by a Judean man who she assumed was trying to come on to her. The Samaritan traveler on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho might have been the mirror image for Jesus who as a Judean traveled through Samaritan territory.

Why should the Samaritan traveler help a man who would probably have spit in his face if he had met him before he got beat up and robbed? Why risk getting caught in a setup in order to help the enemy? When it comes to enemies, you can't trust any not to be lying in wait for you.

Why indeed? Because the Five Books of Moses that both the Samaritans and the Judeans had received from God commanded Israelites to welcome strangers, remembering that they had been strangers in Egypt before God freed them.

So this Samaritan acts on his faith – and at great risk to himself. Being faithful to God takes courage.

It also took Jesus enormous courage to tell this parable. He was telling it to Judeans, and he makes the enemy the one faithful to their religious ideals while the religious leaders of his own people are too afraid to go and help the man.

Jesus took a huge risk that he would get shouted down. At the opening of his ministry in Luke Gospel, he tells the people of his own hometown that his ministry is to the outsiders. He cites precedent from their own scriptures: Even though there were plenty of widows in Israel during a famine, the prophet Elijah was sent to feed a widow living in the enemy territory of Sidon. And even though there were plenty of lepers in Israel, Elisha was sent to Naaman, the commander of the enemy army of Syria. The people of Nazareth were so enraged that that they try to throw him off a cliff.

So this parable is a story of courage, and the very telling of it took great courage.

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Here we are [in this lovely park] on this beautiful day. But we are all too aware that a great shadow has been moving across our land. It is the shadow cast by fear.

If there is need for anything today in our country it is courage, courage to be faithful to Jesus' command to bind together in love a world in which we are all strangers to each other.

Remember his vision of the Great Judgment. At the Judgment, the Son of Man says to some, "Come you blessed of my Father. . . . I was a stranger, and you welcomed me. . . . As you did it to the least of these, you did it to me." (See Matthew 25:31-46)

It is in fact to be faithful to our own ideal written on the base of the statue of liberty. We memorized those words by singing a song:

Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to be free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shores. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me. I lift my lamp beside the golden door.

The motto on the great seal of the United States should be on our bumper stickers: *E pluribus unum: From many one.*

And in our Pledge of Allegiance we pledge to defend liberty and justice *for all*.

It is risky to defend these ideals, but not nearly as risky as being too afraid and failing to do it. If we lack the courage to be faithful to who we are as Christians and as Americans, we will lose our soul. We have seen in the not too recent past what happens when a nation is possessed by fear. It begins with being fearful of outsiders, and spreads like a contagion to being fearful of our own people. It is the devil's greatest weapon. Like a drug, it is a poison by which we will destroy ourselves.

Our military muster the courage to defend our ideals on the battlefield and we praise them for it. But we must muster the courage to defend our ideals at home as well as abroad. In a nation of such diversity, divisiveness is suicide. If military people take risks and sacrifice their lives to protect us at home, and at home we don't have the courage to defend our ideals, their sacrifices will be in vain. They will be defending a nation divided, and a house divided against itself cannot stand.

It is easy to say that we need to have courage. Where do we get it? Where do the military get it? We learn a great lesson from them: They train! And training involves at least three things:

1. They keep clearly in focus the goal they are trying to achieve by willingly wading into danger.
2. They train to have the skills they need to achieve the goal.
- And 3. When faced with danger they pray – a lot!

How do we train to keep our country faithful to what we as followers of Christ want our country to be? Jesus counseled us, "Don't be anxious Seek first the kingdom of heaven, and [all the things we need] will be given to us." So we need to keep our eye **first** of all trained on the ideal of being *e pluribus unum*, "from many one."

We need to feed our souls with the story of Jesus, the man with the courage to love so that all may be one. We are assaulted minute by minute with radio and television coverage of

every frightening thing happening in the world. The people who encourage fear are given a megaphone by the press. Very little if any attention is given to the many creative things people are doing to meet the challenges of the day. Violence has the power to rivet our attention because it appeals to our most primitive instinct of fear. Love is a latecomer on the scene of human evolution. If the human species is to evolve out of our primitive fear and violence into a species that knows how to love, we have to get clear that that is our goal.

Second, being clear about our goal, we need to train for it. Love takes training. That is what a *disciple* is: a person who is being *disciplined*, that is trained, to be like Jesus. We can train ourselves by at least balancing our attention to the media that thrive on terrifying us with the Bible that seeks to give us courage and vision of a courageous life. And then we have to actually practice stretching ourselves into meeting and loving strangers.

Courageous living is the path to a richer and more joyful life. The most satisfying experiences are those that involve an edge of danger. Our country was built by people with great courage. Stephen Vincent Benet wrote a poem, "Western Wagons." One of the lines is "The cowards never started and the weak died on the road." Taking the risk to welcome the stranger will make our country strong and rich. We really have no choice if we wish to live. We are more than ever a global society, bound together with all the peoples of the world in this bundle of life.

Third, when faced with what frightens us, we need to pray. Jesus taught us a prayer we pray at least once a week. In that prayer we pray for the kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven.

In addition to praying for the kingdom to come, we may well need to begin with another kind of prayer: Confession. We may need to begin by confessing that we are too frightened to be faithful to what it means to be American Christians.

Jesus did not expect us not to be afraid. He envisioned his disciples standing before powerful and intimidating people and being afraid. And so he promised us that, if we take the risk, we will receive the gift of his Spirit to give us the courage we need to bear witness to the gospel of God's love and our call to love.

So being clear about our goal of love, we can begin by confessing that we are afraid and weak and need Jesus' Spirit to inspire and strengthen us. With human beings it is impossible, as Gabriel said to Mary and as Jesus later said to his disciples. But with God all things are possible.

Let me close with a great prayer from our tradition:

O God, who binds us together in this bundle of life, help us to understand how our lives depend upon the courage, the industry, the honesty, and the integrity of our fellow human beings, that we may be mindful of their needs, grateful for their faithfulness, and faithful in our responsibilities to them. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.