

**On Pastoral Care**  
(Luke 10:25-37)

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Rev. James Koyama

While I was away Pastoral Care came up in Council. And there was agreement that providing Pastoral Care to our aging congregation is a major reason why I was called to this church. Furthermore, it was felt that I have not fulfilled that obligation, by not making enough calls or visits.

I could argue that some of these perceptions are incorrect. But I think it is better to confess that they are not wrong. I have let the ball drop and I want to say to those of you who really could have used some support that you didn't get, that I'm sorry. My hope is to begin nipping this shortcoming in the bud.

It comes as a surprise to me that Pastoral Care would ever be seen as one of my shortcomings. Every church I have served has given me good marks, when it comes to Pastoral Care. And it has always been an important part of my approach to ministry. But something has changed and I want to explore that through the Good Samaritan story.

## **The Good Samaritan: Effortlessly Compassionate**

I chose alternate readings for today, because together they highlight the importance scripture puts on taking a pastoral approach to life; that when others are wounded and need a hand, we don't just cross the street and walk by on the other side. When Jesus told the Good Samaritan story, he was responding to people who use their reasoning skills to justify doing just that.

One man asks the question, "Who qualifies as a neighbor that I should love as though it were myself?" His question reveals that what he really wants is a definition he can use to narrow down the circle of people he has to care about. If he can narrow the definition of "neighbor" down to just his blood relatives and to a small circle of friends or to his church community, then it stands to reason that the rest of the population can walk off a cliff and he need not concern himself with it. He can continue see himself as a person who is fulfilling his moral duty, even when people outside his little circle are suffering.

But when Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan, he leaves out any details that could identify the injured man. It is simply an injured man. And when the Good Samaritan comes to the injured man's aid, Jesus tells us that it was his sense of compassion that moved him to act. Who

the injured man was or where he was from played no part in his decision.

What I find most wonderful about the story is something that can be easily overlooked. And that is the efficiency and effortlessness with which the Samaritan does the healing work of God. He sees that the man is suffering and needs help. He puts the man on his animal, takes him to the inn, pays the innkeeper and promises to come back later to settle accounts. One, two, three, simply and without hesitation he carries out these tasks and then is on his way.

The Good Samaritan is was not plagued by the kinds of questions Jesus's questioners are asking. He isn't asking any of the further questions that could have arisen at every step that could bog things down. Does this man qualify as my neighbor? Maybe he somehow deserved to be beaten and I shouldn't interfere? Maybe someone who has more in common with him will come along after me and I should leave it to someone else? Do I really have the time to stop and help? There are never enough hours in a day to finish my own chores! How much should I spend to get him some shelter? I mean, you can never have enough safety net for yourself. If nobody is watching, I'm not getting any brownie points, so what's in it for me?

Some of these are rather petty considerations. But petty or not, when contributing to the well being of others, there are considerations that can pop into a person's head, at any stage, to make the simple task of helping someone else seem more complicated and daunting.

But this is not the case with the Good Samaritan. He is somehow free of these mental obstacles and so his response is almost effortless. There is nothing complicated about it. There is no hand-wringing. He acted with simple straightforward compassion, and in a way that made a huge impact for the life of the injured man, and the sun has barely moved across the sky.

### **The Challenge**

In the Good Samaritan story, Jesus is both describing the standards he by which he himself lives, and the standards his followers should set for themselves. It is a model that, I especially, as someone who has been charged with the well-being of the congregation, and with setting a Christ-like example, need to take seriously.

And as members of the "Priesthood of all Believers" Pastoral Care is something you are also charged with through your baptisms and

covenantal vows. We all have a flock of some sort or another that we need to look out for and who need to be able to lean on us in a pinch.

And many of you do this so beautifully, with cards and kind words of encouragement, with visits, a shared meal here and there, and many of you do it in a quiet and unassuming way, freely and without handwringing.

### **Entanglements**

Not as an excuse, but by way of seeking understanding and perhaps in part as a confession, I would like to say something more about the rationalizations that can pop into our minds to make caring for others seem more complicated than it has to be.

I began my ministry here in the middle of the Covid epidemic. It was a strange and, (I think you will agree) a “mindbending” time for everyone. At the welcome cook out, no-one could even see each other’s faces!

None of us quite knew how to deal with what the pandemic threw at us and different people responded differently. We wondered whether the advice we were getting was too cautious or not cautious enough. The introvert or extrovert within each of us was thrown out of balance. Our

social skills became like under-utilized muscles. Being separated for long periods of time revealed us to ourselves in ways that we hadn't quite seen before and influenced us in ways that we still don't quite understand.

That shaking up of our social world didn't begin with Covid. We were already a culture that was struggling with trust issues with church scandals, with people descending through their cell phones into media silos that made them seem like aliens living in opposite news worlds.

Our denomination requires ministers to attend Boundary Trainings, where we are taught to be wary of any situation where we are alone with a parishioner, especially of the opposite sex. And we are not to be alone with a child without the presence of another adult.

And so I think it is understandable that we started to question and maybe even overthink how we should relate to each other; even question so simple a thing as a house visit.

### **Forgiving Ourselves**

If we think about the Pastoral Care you and I do in light of this recent history, it seems as though there are so many considerations that can

make it hard to practice the kind of easy compassion that Jesus described in the Good Samaritan story.

When I first started out as a minister, at a church in DeKalb, Illinois. I made a list of congregation members to visit and made a ton of house calls all through the congregation. Even then a lot of the parishioners were retired and often widowed. And so, they would invite me in for tea and cookies and I gained a lot of weight. But we would just talk.

It was a great decision, because some of the most profound sermons I have ever heard came from the mouths of parishioners who were able to be themselves in their own homes and to share their thoughts with me confidentially.

I didn't know it then, but we all took for granted a level of trust and a feeling of normalcy that we have trouble allowing ourselves today. That in our rush to be cautious and our uncertainty over who we can trust, we have let some of the deeper warmth and luster fade from the golden cords of covenant that bind us together. At least this is how it feels to me.

Another cause for this situation, that I hesitate to bring up, is my part-time status. As you may know, I am actually a quarter time Minister. I am contracted for between 12 and 16 hours a week. Being a part-time minister is a strange concept that is hard to get one's head around. Isn't it true that, if you are a Christian, let alone a minister, your commitment should be with as much of your heart as you can give?

I think the answer is that being 100 percent Christian doesn't mean giving your whole self only to the church. It means giving your whole self to the world, as Jesus did. And so, I think we all understand that the life of the church is not supposed to be the entire focus for any of us. Just as Jesus sent his disciples out to minister to the larger community, our time at church is, in many ways, our preparation for ministry elsewhere. And so I see what I do for the Association and my family life and other friendships as what makes my ministry more than part-time.

It has also been explained to me that, if I extend my ministry in church to half or full-time, while being contracted for quarter time, I will be doing a disservice to future ministers, by creating the expectation that that ministers can be less to do more. So, I just have to learn how to be fully present with you, while drawing a line when it comes to how much I do. And that line is not so easily drawn.



## Conclusion

But in terms of my Pastoral relationships with you, I think it doesn't have to be complicated. In fact, my hope is that it will be freeing for me and hopefully a service to you. I'm excited about breaking free of some of the strangeness that I think still lingers from covid by exercising and reenergizing some of those Pastoral muscles that I have allowed to atrophy.

And I will do that by using the Membership list, the requests for prayers and Prayer Garden to make a personal connection with you. You may like the relationship we have as it is. And that is fine too. If you are shy about being named in the Prayer Garden, but what is happening with you warrants a place on it, let's touch base. All I ask is that you that keep in mind that I am part-time and that sometimes that means I may not be as present as you would like me to be. Together we will strengthen those golden cords of covenant that make a good church a great place to be!