

Pentecost 5C

Luke 10: 25-37

St. Philip's Lutheran Church

July 10, 2022

Steven Petrow is a writer who lives in North Carolina. He was recently waiting in a long line at his favourite bakery, a shop which makes amazing scones. Watching the people ahead of him order the delicious scones out of the glass case, he worried that the bakery would run out. But when he got to the counter, he saw that there was one left, so he pointed to it and said, "I'll take that."

No sooner had he spoken than the person behind him shouted, "Hey, that's my scone! I've been waiting in line for 20 minutes!" Petrow knew that the man had been waiting, but a line is a line.

How do you think Petrow responded? He could have declared, "Sorry, it's mine!" He had every right to do so. Instead, he asked the person, "Would you like half?" The man was shocked into silence, but after a moment he accepted the offer and made a suggestion of his own: "Why don't I buy another pastry and we can share both?"

Then they sat down on a nearby bench to share their pastries.

Turns out the two men had almost nothing in common in terms of jobs, age, political views or marital status. But they shared a moment of connection and simple kindness. "I felt happy," says Petrow, "and, frankly, wanted more of that feeling."

Another story of unexpected kindness is found in today's reading from Luke's gospel.

It begins when a lawyer stands up, revealing himself to be an opponent of Jesus, or at least a skeptic. "Teacher," says the lawyer, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Although there is no indication that the lawyer is a bully or a jerk, he is clearly looking for an opportunity to gain the upper hand.

Jesus responds in a very sensible and matter-of-fact way, asking him, "What is written in the law?" The lawyer quotes Deuteronomy and Leviticus, pointing to the commandments to love the Lord and love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus commends him, saying, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live"

But the lawyer starts sensing that he might be losing his competitive advantage. He wants to come out on top, so he asks Jesus, "And who is my neighbour?"

He fully expects Jesus to describe his neighbour as a person of similar religion, job, age, political views, race or marital status.

Instead, Jesus tells a story we all know well, the story of the merciful, or good Samaritan as we better know it, and there is a curveball in it:

“But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity”

The lawyer didn't see that pitch at all: Jesus was speaking kindly of a stranger, and not just any kind of stranger, but *a Samaritan* — a half-Jew who deserved only slurs and hateful language. Where was Jesus going with this?

Jesus said that the Samaritan went to the Jewish man “and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he paid the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend’”

Wow, the lawyer must have thought, that is some really impressive kindness.

Then Jesus looked the lawyer square in the eye and asked him, “Which one was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” (v. 36).

The lawyer was shocked into silence. He had thought Jesus was talking about *the Jewish man* as the neighbour, but now he is clearly describing *the Samaritan* as the neighbour. He could only say, “The one who showed him mercy.”

And then Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise” (v. 37).

Go and show kindness to the Samaritan half-Jew who is the victim of slurs and hateful language.

Go and help the refugee family struggling to find their place in Canadian society.

Go and split your scone with a person of a different age, political view, race or language.

Go and do likewise.

Usually, when we hear this familiar story, we too ask the question: “Who is my neighbour?” But today I ask you: Who is a Samaritan?

We typically have used the term “Good Samaritan” to describe anyone who puts time and effort into helping a person in need. And that is not a bad thing: those efforts certainly deserve commendation.

But a *true Good Samaritan is someone of a different cultural caste who helps a person outside of that circle*. The term applies to an outsider who helps an insider, not the other way around. The outsider status of the Samaritan is what makes the story so powerful.

The essential aspect of a true Good Samaritan is the difference in ethnicity, caste or cultural status. So, white-on-white charity does not involve a Good Samaritan. Neither does black-on-black or brown-on-brown. Charitable actions in these cases are surely wonderful and needed and good, but they don't involve a Good Samaritan. They simply involve good people — people like God has called us to be.

But when acts of kindness cross ethnic, cultural, political, economical and educational lines, Samaritanship comes into play.

I think we have failed to see the joy that the Samaritan in today's story found in his helpfulness.

When the Samaritan paid the innkeeper to provide lodging and nursing, we think, "What a generous person." The reality is that the Samaritan wanted to help the wounded man. It gave him joy. As Steven Petrow said after splitting his scone, "I felt happy and, frankly, wanted more of that feeling."

Melanie Rudd, an assistant professor of marketing at the University of Houston, has a name for the boost that we get from being kind: "helper's high." She is speaking about the warm glow we feel when we help other people and see them happy. What is interesting is that Rudd calls this kind of giving "impure altruism." She sees it as impure not because it is bad, but because it benefits the giver as well as the receiver. "It's hard to do something truly altruistic," she says, "because we always feel good about it ourselves after we've performed the act of kindness."

Call it altruism or impure altruism, pure kindness or kindness that includes a "helper's high." In the end, it's all good. And best of all, it's contagious.

Yes, that's right. The kindness of other people rubs off on us and makes us more kind. The helpfulness of the Good Samaritan advanced a movement of helpfulness that continues to the present day.

A kindness contagion.

The source of all this goodness is God. Writing to the Corinthians, Paul says that "God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work."

God's generosity rubs off on you, making you more generous. And then, says Paul, "You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity" (2 Corinthians 9:8, 11). You'll be enriched — you'll get a "helper's high."

Thousands of years after Jesus and Paul, modern research is confirming this. Stanford assistant professor of psychology Jamil Zaki has spent years studying how kindness can be transmitted. "Kindness itself is contagious," he writes in *Scientific American*. "It can cascade across people, taking on new forms along the way." He has found that people make larger charitable gifts when they believe that others are being generous. And in situations where people cannot afford to donate, one individual's kindness can inspire others to spread positivity in other ways.

One week before his scone-sharing experience, Steven Petrow was waiting in line to buy a coffee when a customer in front of him whom he didn't know and to whom he hadn't talked, told the barista that he'd pay for Petrow's order. The man said that he did that from time to time because it made him feel good.

Petrow felt he'd been given an unexpected and precious gift. And later he wondered: "Was my willingness to share a scone some days later somehow related to this gift of coffee?"

Maybe. "When we see other people around us acting in generous or kind or empathic ways," says Zaki, "we will be more inclined to act that way ourselves."

It's the kindness contagion. Started by God, advanced by the Good Samaritan and continues to enhance our lives today.

Amen

Sources:

Petrow, Steven. "How a 'kindness contagion' improves lives, especially now." *The Washington Post*, October 27, 2018, washingtonpost.com.

Zaki, Jamil. "Kindness Contagion: Witnessing kindness inspires kindness, causing it to spread like a virus." *Scientific American*, July 26, 2016, scientificamerican.com.