

*S200315 Covid 19 and the Good Samaritan*  
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*Luke 10:25-37*

## **COVID 19 and the Good Samaritan**

People of God -

**The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the power of the Holy Spirit is yours in abundance. And all God's people say: Amen!**

It's been a week of rapid change. A week ago, online church was not on our radar, and yet here we are. Most of us have been spending the latter part of this week processing a lot of grief, anxiety and loss. This microscopic virus called COVID19 has wreaked havoc on a lot of the stability of our day-to-day lives. In an unprecedented action, all publicly funded schools in Ontario have been closed for three weeks (two weeks past March Break). The sports world has shut down - the NBA, the NHL, March Madness, the Little League. Our PM and his wife are in self-quarantine because Sophie has COVID19. March Break trips have been cancelled or cut short, and self-quarantine looms on the horizon for many who have recently travelled - and for those vulnerable to infection. Social media has exploded with lots and lots of conversation around COVID19 - some helpful, most not. Everywhere I turn, a new event or resource is cancelled. And then we have the weird obsession with toilet paper in a panic-driven hoarding-style shopping blitz that the last day or two has seen. We are destabilized, anxious, and uncertain about the future right now.

In our home, we have felt the hit - Tobias was to have played with the Windsor Symphony last night, and while the concert was live streamed, the children and youth were left out of the program. Our other extracurriculars are cancelled for the time being. One of my best friends in Toronto lives with a chronic respiratory and immune disease, she is in self-quarantine. My brother is in the sound business, resourcing concerts and events - his business is hit hard by the social distancing occurring right now. Our collective grief and loss and uncertainty is real. You have your own stories, and as pastors, we are ready to hear how COVID19 is affecting you. We wrestled with the idea of holding church online; it was not a decision taken lightly, and we are planning to step up the spiritual care in this season in as many ways as we can imagine how.

As we made this decision, several faith-based anchors helped orient me. One of the most significant for me was represented by this growth curve. (hand-made poster) You may

have seen it on media sites - forgive my low-tech here, I didn't have time to get media integrated into my sermon - one curve for the rapid spread of COVID19 without social distancing, overwhelming our health care system - and another with aggressive social distancing, with a slower, lower rate of infection at a pace that the system can handle. This graph comes with a hashtag and an urge for people to get on board with social distancing. #flattenthecurve. In school, we called it getting ahead of the curve. For a 40-something like me, with kids at home, we are not at high risk for Covid19; but seeing that curve made me realize how my participation in the curve could prevent exposure and risk for the most vulnerable in our community. And my faith-spidey-senses started vibrating - this is called LOVE, people. When we are staying home, doing nothing, giving up much, grieving much - we are doing this as a great cultural experiment of LOVE. And it reminded me of this story that Jesus once told, you may have heard it too:

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Jesus was talking with some religious people, and they were asking him some questions, and he was asking them some questions, that was the way it went. One asked him how to get on God's good side, and Jesus rebounded the question - what do you think? What does scripture tell you? And the one answered: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your strength and all your mind - and you shall love your neighbour as yourself." Jesus agrees: "Yes! That's it! Go with that." But the one with questions had still one more question: "But who is my neighbour?"

Jesus didn't answer that question with another question - he answered it with a story. The story honours the question as one that we all must answer - who is our neighbour? (I think Jesus asked so many questions, and told so many stories, because we as thinking-feeling people need to work out these answers for ourselves - in our own circumstances, in our own lives - we have to do our own faith-work!)

There was a man traveling from Jericho to Jerusalem, and on the way he was met by bandits - he was robbed and wounded and left to die at the side of the road. The first two people to find him were religious people heading to Jerusalem - first a priest, then a Levite - and they both passed the wounded man by. Then a Samaritan going the other way met the man - and here's what you need to know about Samaritans: they were the enemy people that Jews (like the people Jesus was telling the story to) didn't associate with, eat with, or even touch. The Samaritan tends to the man's wounds, puts the man on his own donkey, takes him to a safe space where he can be cared for, and the Samaritan pays the bill.

Jesus follows up the story with another question - Who was neighbour to that man? And the story does not leave us with ambiguity here - the one who showed mercy! Go and do likewise, says Jesus.

We have all been each of the characters in Jesus' story. We have all been the priest and Levite passing by a person in need, so caught up in our own lives, our own business, our own concerns to even notice sometimes - or to feel responsible to act. Despite our faith, we have not always put it into action. I am also confident we have all been that Samaritan, pouring out our gifts and resources to one whose need we recognize and take some responsibility for: I have heard stories of this; and know there are stories yet to be told, stories that may never be told. God bless you for these stories. Sadly, We also have caused harm to others like the thieves and robbers - though this, I trust, we have often done this without malice aforethought - less boldly than these thieves and robbers! We have wounded people with our words and deeds, with what we have done and what we have left undone. And we have been the one wounded beside the road, feeling vulnerable, hopeless and fearful, in need of assistance from a neighbour. I have been all these characters. Sometimes all in one day.

Who is our neighbour? Who is yours?

Watching the spread of this virus from epidemic to pandemic has demonstrated once again that we live in an increasingly interconnected world. I had remembered the expression "when a butterfly flaps its wings on the other side of the world - it causes a storm on the other" as "when a butterfly sneezes..." which feels apropos of this pandemic. I don't know anyone personally in Wuhan, China. No one I know personally is in Italy, Spain or Iran. But that virus is coming to Canada, person to person, because as human beings we are all connected. We are all neighbours. This is not a time to judge whose at fault here - this is not China's fault, or Iran's. It's not Italy's fault, or Europe's; it's not the fault of the US. We're all in this together; we are all called to respond.

Jesus story is told from the perspective of the wounded man, and that perspective is not accidental. He doesn't begin the story with "A Levite went on a journey, and on that journey he met a man who was wounded....." He doesn't begin the story with the Samaritan setting out and meeting the stranger at the side of the road... No, Jesus begins with the man who is on a journey and is robbed and left at the side. **Our focus and attention throughout the story is on the need of the wounded one, whom Jesus will not let us ignore.** When we follow Jesus, our hearts and minds become attuned to the one needing healing and hope. The weary, wounded, the ones in need get centre stage.

So it is today. The focus of flattening the curve, slowing the spread of disease: social isolation - is love. Our focus and attention is on the needs of the wounded ones, the ones most at risk, whom Jesus will not let us ignore. The most at risk are those with compromised immune systems, and those over 70 - which is actually a large group of people, if you think about it. Romans 15:1-2 reminds us that the strong must bear up the weak. For many of us, these choices are made less about selfishness, and more about protecting others from risk.

Many of us are finding ourselves adrift, with fear and anxiety gaining a significant threshold. This is understandable. Our worlds are changing so rapidly, and the changes being asked of us seem so huge - especially when the need seems - at the moment - distant from us, impersonal and as yet largely theoretical and hypothetical here in Essex County. Yet our hearts, in faith, can - and must - become more and more strongly anchored in love. Love is our secret weapon against fear in these days. Neighbour-love. I John 4:18 says "There is no fear in love, for perfect love casts out fear." John was on to something, because Elisabeth Kubler Ross says "we cannot feel love and fear together at exactly the same time. They're opposites. If we're in fear, we are not in a place of love. When we are in a place of love, we cannot be in a place of fear."

I Peter 5:7 says "Cast all your anxiety upon God, because he cares for you". 2 Timothy 1:7 reminds us: "For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power, and love, and of sound mind".

The Heidelberg Catechism makes this faith statement before all others:  
What is your only comfort in life and in death?

That I am not my own,  
But belong with body and soul  
Both in life and in death,  
To my faithful saviour Jesus Christ.

People of God - We are not our own, but we belong to God; and we are together God's body on earth. We are connected in ways large and small, physical and spiritual. As we weather these changes enacted by social distancing, let us cast aside decisions and expressions of fear, choosing instead to embody neighbour-love. Just in a different way than we are used to. Let us rise to the challenges of these ever changing days in new and creative ways. Can't worship in person? Worship online with us. Leave us a heart emoji so we can know you're here. Participate in conversation on our facebook page. Check in on your actual-factual neighbours; leave a loaf of love-bread on the porch with a note and your number in case they need your help? Make phone calls, send texts and emails to express your care. Perhaps you can deliver supplies to someone who is or will be in quarantine with a loving note.

Resist actions of panic. Resist greed, selfishness, and hoarding; these go against the gospel.

Remember Jesus' story embodying neighbour-love, and keep the ones in need at the centre of the story. When we are the ones in need, may we receive neighbour-love from one another; when we are empowered to serve the weary and wounded - even if it's by staying home! - may we exemplify neighbour love to one another.

Loving our neighbour. The golden rule. It's time is now. It's always been time.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your mind and all your strength  
And love your neighbour as yourself.

Go and do likewise. And do not be afraid; God is with you. AMEN.