

“Can’t Touch This”  
Luke 10:25-37

The story is told about a certain man who fell into a pit and could not get himself out. A therapist came by and said, "I really feel your pain down there." A common sense person came by and said, "It was inevitable someone would fall in there eventually." A fundamentalist said, "Only bad people fall into pits" even as a Calvinist swung by and said, "We all deserve our pits." A mathematician came by and calculated the odds of falling into the pit, and a self-centered person exclaimed, "You haven't seen anything until you've seen *my* pit!" An optimist saw the man and said, "Could be worse" even as a pessimist rejoined, "It will *get* worse before it's over." Then Jesus came by, dropped down onto his belly in the slippery mud around the pit, reached out a hand, and pulled the man free.

This is a modern day paraphrase of the parable of what we know in our Bible story for today as the Good Samaritan. But this modern day paraphrase like many of our readings and interpretations of this very familiar story misses a key point which Jesus was trying to make and which many of his listeners would have realized. The parable of the Good Samaritan is so familiar to us today that we often miss how radical it is in its challenge for our faith and lives. In order to get some of the impact Jesus was aiming for, we need to remember that this was a parable given to help respond to the challenge of the lawyer who came to Jesus. Parables were not stories that just illustrated a point that the speaker was making. They were not simple moral lessons to help people understand a simple truth. Parables were stories that were supposed to shock people out of their comfortable worldview to see things from the perspective of the kingdom of God. Biblical scholar Walter Wink notes that, "Parables are tiny lumps of coal squeezed into diamonds, condensed metaphors that catch the rays of something ultimate and glint it at our lives. Parables are not illustrations; they do not support, elaborate or simplify a more basic idea. They are not ideas at all, nor can they ever be reduced to theological statements. They are the jeweled portals of another world; we cannot see through them like windows, but through their surfaces are refracted lights that would otherwise blind us -- or pass unseen." Megan McKenna calls the parables of Jesus the "arrows of God," because, "they pierce us and make us painfully aware of our need to change the way we relate to ourselves, others and God...Parables draw us in, softly and with subtlety. Then they hit us with the sledge hammer of revelation." So to simply look at the parable of the Good Samaritan as a story about compassion, we would completely miss the point, the shock of the parable. This parable is not only about doing good deeds and being kind to strangers.

The first step to getting the surprise element of this familiar parable is to put it in its larger context. Jesus was using it to respond to the questions posed to him a lawyer. A lawyer in those days was a person who studied and knew very well the Law of Moses/the Jewish Law. This man who asks Jesus important questions: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" and "Who is my neighbor?" But this man is not just an ordinary man. He was an expert in the field of faith. He knew the Bible front and back. His question could not be taken or answered lightly. So Jesus gives him a shocking response, a response that is supposed to make this expert open up to a new way of thinking. The shock factor of the parable comes from the fact that the man in the story who obeys the Law of God is actually a Samaritan. Those who were entrusted with preserving the Law broke it. The priest and the Levite both ignore the man in the ditch but the Samaritan does not. The priest and Levite would have known about the commandment in Deuteronomy 15 where each Israelite is called to assist their neighbor when they are in distress. What is important about the ethnicity of the Samaritan is that the Samaritans and the Jews were enemies. The Samaritans were considered resident aliens in the land and represented to the Jews the accommodation and compromise of the Jews who were in exile in Babylon and then

married foreigners and followed the religions of other nations. There were so many differences and disagreements between the Jews and the Samaritans that Jesus couldn't have picked a worse enemy of his people to use as an example of goodness. Think of the worst possible enemy you have and then imagine that Jesus told the parable about that good "enemy." Seeing that the person who is least respected being the example and model for honoring God's law was a major shock to the people in the time of Jesus. This parable was not intended to be a sweet story of compassion. It is a political, religious and social statement to help the people of that time understand that God's grace and love could come from the places they would least expect. Imagine the shock we would have if the story was told about the good terrorist.

This reversal of perspective is so essential to the kingdom of God. It is the only way we can truly experience God's peace and wholeness in our lives and in our world. . The whole lesson of this parable is about learning that our wholeness comes from the wholeness of all people: Our friends and our enemies. In his book, *Ubuntu: I in You and You in Me*, Michael Battle notes that *Ubuntu* is "an African concept of personhood in which the identity of the self is understood to be formed interdependently through community." Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who wrote the foreword to this book offers further clarification: "A person with Ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed." Our well-being is deepened by the well-being of others. Our hatred, prejudice against, or resentment of others will often lead us to more negative feelings and to a sense of lack and frustration in ourselves. Even though it feels good to criticize others and to gossip about them, this kind of competition often hurts our souls. Even the destruction of our enemies takes away from our wholeness.

In a book called, *One Small Step Can Change Your Life*, Robert Maurer shares that our brains can be trained to focus on our sense of wholeness or on our sense of lack. When we ask ourselves a particular question repeatedly every day, our mind becomes accustomed to gathering that information all the time so it's there when we call for it. When we repeatedly remind ourselves of scarcity and ask ourselves how we can get more, our mind becomes conditioned for anxiety, gathering constantly as a "background process" any information that could suggest scarcity, danger, ways in which we are or could be wronged. The more we worry, the more we see cause to worry. This in turn can lead us to always feel anxious and miserable. What if you start each morning with asking yourself, "Where am I going to see God today?" Instead of reading or hearing the bad news of the world first thing, you can take the time to open up to God's possibilities of goodness and love in the world. In the evening you can ask yourself, "Where have I seen God today?" This kind of simple opening and closing of the day can transform your whole worldview because you literally invite your mind to gather up information and processes that affirm life and the goodness of God's presence in the world.

The kingdom of God is dependent on our ability to focus on love in our world. A great example of learning to focus on love verses our human divisions and hatreds is the story of three women of three different faith traditions coming together to build a different future for their children. According to their website, "The Faith Club was started when Ranya Idliby, an American Muslim of Palestinian descent, recruited Suzanne Oliver, a Christian, and Priscilla Warner, a Jew, to write a children's book about their three religions. As the women's meetings began, it became clear that they had their own adult struggles with faith and religion, and they needed a safe haven where they could air their concerns, admit their ignorance, and explore their own faiths. Ranya, Suzanne, and Priscilla began to meet regularly to discuss their religious backgrounds and beliefs and to ask each other tough questions. As the three women met and talked, there

were no awkward silences—no stretches of time with nothing for them to say to each other. Honesty was the first rule of the Faith Club, and with that tenet as a foundation, no topic was off limits. With courage, pain, and sometimes tears, Ranya, Suzanne, and Priscilla found themselves completely transformed by their experience inside the safe cocoon of the Faith Club, and they realized that they had learned things so powerful they wanted to share them with the rest of the world. This is their story.” This issue with which these women dealt is a very tough one because it is one of those hot button topics in politics today. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) was in the news this past week because of the study paper they affirmed about the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians and the tension between Israel’s security and the need to end the occupation of Palestinian land.

The invitation and challenge is before each one of us to touch those who are considered the enemy, to show mercy to those who are considered beyond redemption, and to be the presence of Christ in the world. Who are the people you resent the most? Who are the untouchables in your world? Could you see any goodness in them? Would you be able to reach out to them? This challenge is not only about changing the world around us into wholeness and love, it is also about changing the world inside each of us. Our world does not need any more politicians and lawyers to solve its problems. Our world is in need of more healers, people who are able to love beyond the boundaries that separate us. The story is told about a student who went to his teacher and asked, “What is love”? The teacher said, “The total absence of fear.” The student asked, “What is it we fear”? The teacher said, “Love.” May we always trust the great power of love in our lives. Amen.