

## **“Risky Love”**

July 10, 2016

*Starting Over, Digging Deeper series*

I didn't know when I planned this series. I didn't know that Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan would be the Scripture to guide us in this particular week. I didn't know that my plan to focus on “risky love” would fall just after the events of this week. I didn't know that talking about authentic faith in Jesus would be so difficult at a time like this. If I'm honest, it's always difficult, but I feel it especially today.

People are “neighbors to love rather than commodities to use.” God created you and me for community, and yet here we are. Violence and tragedy, racial tension and strife in St. Paul, Baton Rouge, and Dallas. Lives lost, families grieving, communities grieving.

Friends, we started at the beginning a few weeks ago remembering that each of us is beloved by God. We talked about God coming in Jesus in the flesh - setting up camp with us and embracing our humanity. And I want you to know that I slept in a tent on Friday night. It wasn't that bad. I'd even do it again, but it reminded me of God's love for us - of God wanting to be with us. Jefferson Bethke says, “God stoops low...and comes close...reaches out and touches us.” God desires relationship - intimacy - with us.

Last week we talked about being free to love - that the love of Jesus in us sets us free to love and serve others in his name. Someone reacted with the truth that she feels free to love even those who are hard to love. And that's a deeper truth! That's the risky love that Jesus calls us to in the parable.

When I think of risky love, I think of this image. (SHOW IMAGE)

In 1996, the Ku Klux Klan was staging a rally in Ann Arbor. Hundreds of protesters turned out, and Keshia Thomas was among them. A man in the crowd was assumed to be in support of the KKK because of his dress and his tattooed markings, and soon the protest turned violent.

People were hitting and kicking the man. Keshia Thomas separated herself from the crowd and threw herself over him to shield him from harm. Friends, that is risky love. That is an embodiment of Jesus' words about being a neighbor. It is hard. It is costly. It is risky.

Keshia Thomas said, “When they dropped him to the ground, it felt like two angels had lifted my body up and laid me down.” Her act of risky love still gets to me when I see the image and when I consider her willingness to risk her life for someone who may have seen her as less than human. When asked about why she did it, she said, “The biggest thing you can do is just be kind to another human being. It can come down to eye contact, or a smile. It doesn't have to be a huge monumental act.”

Risky love. The Good Samaritan may be too familiar to us. Don't get me wrong - knowing Scripture is vital to growing in faith, but the Good Samaritan may be something we already know. This scenario that Jesus uses is so well-known that there are awards given, laws named, and counseling centers and hospitals called "Good Samaritan." We get it, Jesus. We have to love our neighbor. We have to help those in trouble.

But hear the man's question: "just what do you mean by "neighbor?" The idea of neighbor is vital to who we are down to our very core. We need good neighbors – it's vital to our health! Studies have proven that relationships where we get "face time" with others make us happier people.

Being a good neighbor is a universal concept, so much so that advertisers pick up on it. There's State Farm Insurance – remember their slogan? "And like a good neighbor, State Farm is there." There's a chain - Good Neighbor Pharmacy.

So who do you call "neighbor?" It is that person who lives next door, or at least close to you? I grew up in the country, and we claimed a lot of people as neighbors. Some weren't so close in distance, but we had a relationship. We counted on them, and they counted on us.

I always think of *Mr. Rogers Neighborhood* when I think of neighbors. Mr. Rogers had a way of welcoming us as neighbors, even though it was into his studio set. And he made a bold request every day: *Please won't you be my neighbor?* Usually we don't ask people to be our neighbors. It just happens. And yet if you look at what Mr. Rogers did, he included all people as his neighbors breaking down barriers of social status, race, different ability. He created community and taught us to do the same.

Neighborliness is an issue for Jesus - and for Gospel writer Luke. The parable of the Good Samaritan, as we call it, forces us to look at who we call "neighbor." This character is our unsung hero – the one we should be like. Every time I read it, I cheer for him. Yes, he did the right thing! Easy to say, but much harder to do, right?

"So who is my neighbor?," the Pharisee asks. Jesus told him what to do, or at least directed him to what he already knew. He knew the 613 laws, and Jesus sums them up: "Love God with your all, and love your neighbor." This guy is a good Jew. He knows the Law, and Jesus boils 613 points down to the essentials. This man can recite the Law with the best of them, but he wants Jesus to tell him more. "What do you mean by 'neighbor?' Who is that?"

Luke says it's all a test, but no matter. This man knows what he should do, so why the question? Is he avoiding responsibility? It reminds me of an oral exam. You may know what to say, but what about applying it? He can answer the question about loving God and neighbor, but will he pay it more than lip service?!?

Sometimes we want a neat formula for behavior, especially for Christian behavior. Sometimes I just want a clear answer - God, what do I do? How do I make this faith thing work?

Well, Jesus doesn't do neat very well. Most of the time, we get into more questions than answers. Or if there are answers, they're tough ones. Even here, Jesus takes the question to the next level. From "who is my neighbor?" to "how do I love my neighbor?"

Jesus is always teaching about the Kingdom of God. "Neighbor" means more than how close we live to one another. "Neighbor" means more than people who are like us in race, color, class, creed, lifestyle, education, and so on. "Neighbor" means that we are connected because we are human beings. "Neighbor" is about sharing humanity. That's what I hear in Keshia's story. That's what I hear in the story about the woman and cop from this week. It's about seeing one another as human beings.

That's why this story that Jesus tells is so revolutionary. First, the scene. This road from Jericho to Jerusalem was rough. In 20 miles, it went descended 3,300 feet, which made for difficult terrain where robbers loved to hide. Anyone was a target, especially someone traveling all alone!

Secondly, the characters. The priest and Levite are church folk. They are you and me. They have every reason to stop and care for the dying man, but professional excuses for not stopping win out. The people listening were waiting for the end – they figured on a good Jewish layperson stopping to help.

But they have to be so surprised when it's a Samaritan – a half-breed, no good, doesn't worship like me, dirty, smelly, don't want to be around him, get away from me Samaritan! He has every reason not to stop. But he is the one who has compassion. He is the one who is a neighbor. He is the one who knows who is neighbor is.

Someone said, "Compassion is the sometimes fatal capacity for feeling what it's like to live inside somebody else's skin (or walking in their shoes!). It is the knowledge that there can never really be any peace and joy for me until there is peace and joy finally for you too." This attitude is costly.

The man from Samaria changes his plans, cleans the wound, pays two days' wages out of his own pocket, and sacrifices himself for the sake of someone else. He's in it for the long haul. This attitude is costly. It costs time, money, position, power, and privilege. It means getting over the fact that sometimes people screw up and make trouble for themselves. ("He shouldn't have been on that road all alone. What was he thinking?") It means looking to God's mercy rather than our judgment.

Mister Rogers said, "All of us, at some time or other, need help. Whether we're giving or receiving help, each one of us has something valuable to bring to this world.

That's one of the things that connects us as neighbors – in our own way, each one of us is a giver and a receiver.”

We're more apt to focus on the Samaritan whenever we hear the parable. And we should hear Jesus' call to compassion. But the Samaritan also challenges us to bring hope. He challenges us to live by Kingdom code – to love God and neighbor – and to get a bigger picture of our neighborhood. It's as wide as God's world. So how big is our neighborhood? Whom does it include or exclude?

Another piece of wisdom from Mister Rogers: “The more I think about it, the more I wonder if *God* and *neighbor* are somehow One. ‘Loving God, Loving neighbor’ – the same thing? For me, coming to recognize that God loves *every* neighbor is the ultimate appreciation!”

We are fully loved and fully known by God, and God wants us to know that! How are we seeing each other? It's not enough to be friends on Facebook. It's not enough to send an E-mail or text or connect on Instagram.

What does authentic faith look like? What can you and I do? We can LOVE! I don't mean the sticky, sweet love emotional stuff. I mean the stuff of this parable from Jesus' lips to our ears - love that is costly, risky, vulnerable. Love that goes the extra mile. Love that isn't easy or comfortable.

The truth is that relationships are messy, time-consuming, and unpredictable. Relationships require us to be engaged in others' lives - not just with the push of a button, but with conversation and care.

Love forces us to look at ourselves and our community and do something - examine our fears, our motives, our prejudices and reach out to others so that we can seek understanding. Do something - engage others in honest conversations around race, violence, and community relationships. Do something - send a note to our police and public safety workers. Do something - use the social capital you have to make a difference.

It was in 1967 - almost 50 years ago - when Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. preached: “We are called to play the good Samaritan on life's roadside, but that will be only an initial act. One day the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be beaten and robbed as they make their journey through life. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it understands that an edifice that produces beggars needs restructuring.” I read those words, and I was convicted.

Risky Love changes us, changes others, and changes our church. It changes - transforms - structures. It changes the world so that it's more like the Kingdom of God.

May we love with risky love. May God help us. AMEN.