

In the story of the Good Samaritan that we just heard, where do the different characters finally end up? The robbers have done their foul deed and have walked off stage with whatever they stole from the traveler they attacked & beat up.

—The priest and the Levite have each continued on the way to Jericho after overlooking the half-dead traveler lying beside the road.

—That traveler is recovering at an inn, where the innkeeper has been entrusted with his care and has received a down payment on whatever it will cost.

—The Samaritan has resumed his journey, promising to return to the inn and settle up accounts for the traveler's expenses, someone previously unknown to him.

But where are we left, you and I, who hear this story? We listen to it together with an unknown lawyer, the one who wants to know where his neighborly obligation begins and ends. Together with the lawyer, we hear this command of Christ, "Go and do likewise." We are given as an example of neighborliness this Samaritan, who at inconvenience and risk to himself, helps a half-dead stranger.

This story would seem to open the floodgates and drown us beneath the troubles of the world. For, truth be told, we have needy neighbors in every direction. It's hard to know what to do. Can we keep our souls from turning numb in the face of the wholesale sorrows that surround us? How can we avoid ending up exhausted, adding ourselves to the list of those aching for attention? Is there a way to sidestep compassion fatigue, so that the fire of concern within us does not flare up and then burn out?

Let's consider the story again, specifically the actions of this Samaritan.

First, he sees the wounded traveler. Second, he is moved to pity. Third, he does what he can to help. Each of these steps is essential if the Samaritan is to prove both compassionate and effective. Let's consider each step in turn.

—First, the Samaritan sees the wounded traveler. He does not turn his eyes away. He does not glance at the victim and then look elsewhere.

—Nor does the Samaritan see the wounded traveler and then dismiss him. He doesn't say to himself, "That man must be Jewish, and we Samaritans are enemies of the Jews." He doesn't say, "That man was mugged because he dared to travel this dangerous road alone. Serves him right!"

—Instead, the Samaritan recognizes the wounded traveler as a fellow human being, someone like himself, a child of God. He looks down upon this broken one and acknowledges the best and most important aspects of who he is, not other features which are secondary at best. Although the traveler is a stranger, somehow the Samaritan recognizes him.



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Secondly, the Samaritan is moved with pity. The word here in the original Greek of the New Testament means he is moved with compassion. We might say that the Samaritan feels for the broken traveler as deeply as it is possible for him to feel. The Samaritan recognizes a bond between himself and this stranger who lies half dead beside the highway. Such recognition comes at a cost, for the Samaritan identifies with the wounded stranger and as far as he can, feels his pain, his abandonment, his fear.

Thirdly, this Samaritan, who was moved with pity, stands as a portrait of God as God appears in the Hebrew Bible, especially the Prophets. For the God of whom these prophets speak is moved by human pain and sorrow & somehow suffers along with his people. The sorrow felt by the people becomes the sorrow felt by God. The Samaritan's empathy gives way to action. He does what he can to help. That turns out to be quite a bit, enough to make the difference between life and death.

What he does first is anoint the traveler's wounds. He uses oil and wine for this. Here there is irony. Oil and wine are used in worship at the Temple. The priest and Levite handle them there, but for their own reasons, they pass by the wounded traveler out on the highway, providing him no relief. It is left to the Samaritan, someone hated by the Jews, to engage in true worship, to make an acceptable offering of wine and oil, and to pour them out on the altar of this broken human body. Most people who travel the steep and winding road from Jerusalem to Jericho do it on foot, but this Samaritan is fortunate enough to have a mount, perhaps a donkey, and he places the half-dead traveler on the animal's back for the slow trip to the inn. Once there, he opens his wallet and gives the innkeeper a significant sum for the traveler's care and promises to return and cover whatever further expenses are required.

The Samaritan recognizes quickly what must be done. He does not hesitate to put his resources to use. Clearly, he is the right person in the right place at the right time. In a world where we have needy neighbors in every direction, how can we keep from numbness of soul, exhaustion, or the extinction of our internal fire of concern? The actions of the Samaritan provide us with a pattern to follow.

This is not easy, especially in today's world, where we are bombarded by far too many images of all kinds. The phrase used is empathy burnout. Only a few images can command our attention. Only a few circumstances, at most, can be the basis for our deep reflection and lead us to recognize the strangers there as real and similar to ourselves. But a few is all we need. If we truly see the wounded of this world, then we will be moved to pity. We will feel their situation in our heart & soul. At least initially, we cannot do this often; we lack the capacity. But we can do this on occasion. And doing so will enable us, not to fix the entire planet on our own, not to help everybody, but to help somebody.

When this happens, we will not be acting on the basis of obligation or guilt or compulsion. Instead, compassion felt deep down will motivate what we do and give our action a reality accessible in no other way. Our response will have to be something from God, for this is the way that God is moved.

On the basis of this seeing and feeling, we can take action that is worth taking. We can do what we can to help. This means putting our resources to intelligent use and recognizing that we have more to offer than we realized at first. We may discover ourselves to be someone who's the right person at the right place at the right time, an agent of divine compassion. And what better role can any of us ask for than that?

When Jesus closes the parable of the Good Samaritan with "Go and do likewise" he is not imposing a single strict way to respond to travelers who have ended up in trouble. His intention is far larger and more practical, something that applies to countless circumstances.

We are truly to see somebody in need. We won't be considering every needy person on the planet, but we will be recognizing somebody with whom we have life and hardship in common. The sight of that person will not lead to compulsive activity or obligation or guilt. Instead, we will be moved to pity. We will feel for that person, as deeply as we can feel.

This will lead us to action. Because we have truly seen and truly felt, there is reason to believe that the way we use resources will be wise and effective.

Thus we will find that, by grace, we have turned out to be the right person in the right place at the right time.

And later, when still another needy neighbor lies broken beside the highway, we will be better able to see, to feel, and to act in a way that reveals us as a neighbor to that person. For the answer to our question, "Who is my neighbor?" will appear there before us, as plain as day in the one who awaits our action. And we ask God that we would be moved to be "God's Hands" here on Earth. Amen.