

I. Intro

A. You are aware of the events of the day – the pain and hurt, the tension and misunderstanding, the ongoing demonstrations. Some of it linked to videos of black men being killed by white authorities. Some of it being linked to longer-standing, generational and historic issues. Alongside this there is the fear and frustration surrounding COVID and the job loss and economic disruption it has caused.

B. I could go on. There are calls to defund the police, some of the demonstrations have not been peaceful. Seattle has significant problems - suffice it to say, it's not a great moment for our country. Lots of anger, anxiety, mistrust and confusion. Not as much peace, love and understanding as we might hope.

C. And we are asking, "So now what? What am I supposed to do? How am I supposed to think and respond? What am I supposed to say? How do we move forward?"

D. Last week I started with Paul's command in Romans 12 to honor others ahead of ourselves; I set out five assumptions: racism is evil, the problems are bigger than you think, we have no choice but to reform, violence is wrong and the Church needs to step up. And then I ended with the suggestion that:

1. As a church we commit to working for equal justice under the law.
2. And that as individuals – or as families – we commit to Pray, Listen, Engage and Acknowledge.

E. I also gave you my email and said, "if you disagree with what I am saying, write to me." I even promised to read everything that you wrote.

1. And you responded. Thank you. It was good and I am glad I did it. I probably will not do it again anytime soon, but it was very helpful.

II. As the last week has unfolded – and I have continued to get emails, talk with friends, listen to podcasts, pray, ask around about what other churches are doing, it became obvious that other points could and should be made.

A. This situation is not going to be quickly resolved. It is going to take a lot of time and effort. A lot of patience and resolve. If we want to mirror the values we see in the kingdom of God, we are going to need to commit to be working on reconciliation long after other issues push it off the front page.

B. We are all going to need to learn how to process complexity and differences.

1. I have not been impressed with what is going on – with the thoughtfulness or quality of the discussions or the conversations.
2. I am glad more people are talking about issues of reconciliation. I do not expect these conversations to be orderly and smooth. Nor do I think conversations have to be perfect to be helpful. But I worry. Being called a racist one minute and a naïve fool the next leaves me asking God, how will we keep these conversations going long enough to make progress – to achieve real change.

C. We need the church to be the church – a community of grace, hope and love that is focused on Reaching People and Renewing Communities.

1. When I am asked what I am doing – or what the church is doing - to end racism, I find myself conceding, "We are not doing enough." But then saying, do understand: the solution is the Kingdom of God.

2. I have little hope that community programming, or laws from DC or Springfield, can fix what is broken. The plan – God’s plan - is to build a new community; one in which people are transformed by the Gosper – by the love of God – and then more profoundly shaped by Christ’s teaching than by CNN or FOX so that they can (we can) be a transforming force in this broken world.
3. Let me be clear, I have little hope that outside of God that we can successfully overcome the pain, confusion, disagreement, anger and hurt.
4. I am praying for revival. I am praying that we see people come to faith, surrender more fully to Christ, and as his disciple, change:
 - a) Change from being an undisciplined and broken drain on others – to some one making things better for everyone.
 - b) Change from holding spiteful, racist attitudes, towards pouring the heart, time and money into helping those who are struggling. (A change I saw not long ago from an extended family member).
5. I am praying the Holy Spirit unites and empowers His church to be a locus of love, hope and wisdom - a catalyst for ways forward.
- 6.
7. It will require all of that, plus sacrifice and resilience and time.
8. But mostly more Jesus.

III. So let me pivot to that right now. Today I want to share how Jesus might answer the question I framed at the beginning: Now What? What am I supposed to do? How am I supposed to think?

A. We do not have a specific example of Jesus answering questions about what to do during this intersection of a global pandemic, racial tension, economic decline and public unrest. But:

1. There were lots of scary diseases that people didn’t understand: (think: leprosy);
2. And there was lots of racial tension – such as with the Samaritans;
3. And there were lots of protests – including more than a few that didn’t stop with riots and looting, but became full out revolutions. The Jewish people kept trying to reclaim Israel – especially Jerusalem – from Rome. I am not sure they called it an autonomous zone, but they might have.
4. And Jesus fielded lots of questions. I don’t think it’s that hard to imagine what Jesus would say – how he would answer.

IV. He’d tell a story.

A. One that was interesting and seemed simple enough. And one that, though it didn’t always seem like it was immediately on point, was the kind of story that kept you thinking and thinking. And you would eventually realize that he hadn’t actually answered the question you asked, but he’d looked into your heart and answered the question you should have asked – the question behind the question. And his story called you to a whole new level of serving, loving and living.

V. Let me read one of the stories – which are more often called parables. It's found in Luke 10. Jesus was being grilled by a Jewish religious leader. And the whole thing is a trap.

- A. What the religious leader asks is, "What do I have to do to gain eternal life?"
- B. Jesus answers with a question: "What does the Bible say?"
- C. The man says, "Love the Lord with all of your heart, and love your neighbor as yourself."
- D. Jesus says, "Good answer. Go and do that and you will be fine".
 - 1. Of course, that is an impossible task, you can almost picture Jesus winking at the crowd. Remember, they are jousting.
 - 2. And the man fires back with what he thinks is the winning play. He asks, "Who qualifies as my neighbor?" He was not the first person to ask this question. Leviticus 19:18 contains a command to love one's neighbor, and the religious leaders often discussed who this applied to. They generally agreed that:
 - a) It was only Jews and that it didn't apply to enemies.
 - b) Many of the Pharisees claimed it did not include Jews who were not Pharisees.
 - 3. So this was a popular discussion topic. And viewed as sort of an unanswerable question.

VI. And Jesus responds with this story:

A. "There was once a man traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho. This was a well-known path that no one liked to travel – it was 17 miles long and mostly downhill. But it was a windy road which gave bad guys plenty of places to hide.

B. On the way he was attacked by robbers. They took his clothes, beat him up, and went off leaving him half-dead. Luckily, a priest was on his way down the same road, but when he saw him, he angled across to the other side.

1. First century Jewish culture was very structured. People didn't mix much outside their strata. The priest – who was highly educated and spoke Hebrew – was upper crust. So, he's not likely to get involved helping this naked guy, even though he should. If the man had been dressed (or could talk) and the priest could make an assessment about his status, well maybe he would have. But he's not going to help just anyone. And besides, the bad guys who beat him up might still be around. So he moves on.

C. Then a Levite – another religious man - showed up; he also avoided the injured man.

1. The Levites were slightly lower than Priests – think, religious leaders second class. This guy doesn't stop either.

2. It's not entirely fair to pick on these two. In prep for this sermon I read newspaper accounts – and watched video footage – of people walking past those who are hurt and bleeding. We hear these stories all the time. People walk by rather than get involved. But the religious leaders were supposed to help.

D. "A Samaritan traveling the road came on him.

1. The Samaritans are the Jews' enemy. The Jews hated Samaritans, who returned the favor. They were viewed as apostates who had abandoned the true faith of the Jews for heretical teachings. This made them worse than gentiles whom the Jews commonly called "dogs." The hatred between Jews and Samaritans had been going on for nearly 1,000 years. And it included some prominent low points – such as when the Jews had destroyed the Samaritan temple, and around 6 A.D, and so the Samaritans had retaliated by scattering human bones in the Jewish temple in Jerusalem during Passover, defiling it and preventing all worship.

2. It would have been hard for Jesus to pick a more shocking hero for this story.¹ In today's vernacular he might tell it this way, "A man was beat up. First the Evangelical pastor stepped around him, then the Catholic Priest did. Finally, a radical Muslim cleric happened by and stopped."

3. In this story, the wrong guy is the good guy. The Samaritans are half-breed heretics.

E. "A Samaritan traveling the road came on him. When he saw the man's condition, his heart went out to him. He gave him first aid, disinfecting and bandaging his wounds. Then he lifted him onto his donkey (which meant he would have to walk), led him to an inn, and made him comfortable. In the morning he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take good care of him. If it costs any more, put it on my bill—I'll pay you on my way back.'

1. He is being enormously generous.

F. Then Jesus asks, "What do you think? Which of the three became a neighbor to the man attacked by robbers?"

G. "The one who treated him kindly," the religion scholar responded.

H. Jesus said, "Go and do the same."

VII. So notice a few things:

A. First, Jesus' parables were usually marked by a surprise; a twist that forced his audience to rethink things. In this one he changes the question and he introduces a shocking hero.

1. In the story Christ tells, a man is beaten and robbed and left lying on the road. The first character to pass by is the most respected in Jewish culture—a priest. The second character, a Levite, is also admired but slightly below the priest on the social hierarchy. Jesus had primed his audience to expect the hero of the story to be someone below the Levite. Perhaps an ordinary Jew without the great religious training of a priest or Levite. That would have been surprising.

2. But Jesus' introduces a Samaritan as the hero – this was downright offensive.

3. Rather than set it up with the Lawyer as the one walking down the road and having the Samaritan as the one beat up and then enter into a discussion about whether he should help the beat-up Samaritan – which the lawyer would have fought, saying, "We can't help everyone." Jesus flips it and says: if you are beat up, how do you want the person walking by you to define neighbor?

B. Which means, Jesus doesn't miss this opportunity to speak against racism. It wasn't an obvious part of the question he was asked, but Jesus made it one so he could talk about it.

1. A lot of human history can be organized around who people have decided to look out for. There was a time when people only felt obligated to care for their immediate relatives.
2. Then there was the time people gathered in settlements and cities and their loyalty began to extend to their village – which was their extended family.
3. By the time Jesus had this conversation with the lawyer, this circle of identity extended to one's entire ethnic or religious group.² Jews, like the lawyer, only felt they were called to love and serve other Jews.³
4. To Jesus way of thinking that is still way too small. He refuses to allow us to limit who we love. It's not just those who look like us or talk like us or who move in the same social circles we do. By making a Samaritan the hero, Jesus says we have to set aside race, politics, class and religion and help those in need.

C. A third thing to note is the radical and holistic way Jesus defines the care we are supposed to have for our neighbor.

1. Jesus gives a big, practical, all-inclusive definition of love – meeting a person's physical, material and financial needs.
2. Again, Jesus refused to let the lawyer limit who to love or the definition of love.

D. Fourth, as we think about all of this in context it will eventually become obvious that we are the ones who are broken and hurting who need rescuing, and Jesus is the Great Samaritan who stops to save us.

1. He enters our broken, dangerous world and does everything that is needed to care for us – at his own expense. He rescues us.
2. You may not see this the first time you read through, but at some point the light goes on.

VIII. There is a lot here. Which is part of the reason it is such a famous story. In light of that it shouldn't surprise you to learn that it has been painted many times.

A. Here is a picture by Van Gough – who I highlighted in the last series. I am not that enamored by Van Gough as this would suggest, but I was studying him a while back. And one of the most famous paintings of the Good Samaritan is his.

B. As you may remember, he was a Christ follower, and in fact, worked as a missionary for a while among poor coal miners.

C. His painting highlights the wealth of the Samaritan

1. He places an open chest at the Samaritan's feet communicating the man has generously given from his own treasure to care for this stranger.

D. Vincent lived at a time when Christianity was dominant, but the love of Christians was often cold and those who acted like the Samaritan were ridiculed rather than affirmed. Vincent learned this lesson during his brief time as a missionary to coal miners. His church support was withdrawn after just six months because he lacked “certain qualities” necessary for a clergyman. In truth, Vincent’s willingness to identify with and serve the poor was too scandalous

E. Vincent van Gogh understood the true shock and scandal of the parable. It wasn’t the apathy of the priest or Levite, but the fact that Jesus made a Samaritan the hero. To emphasize this point, Vincent put a bright red and white turban on the Samaritan’s head. It functions as a visual target in the painting. The viewer’s eye, like God’s, is drawn to it. It was Vincent’s way of saying, Here is what God sees and cares about—compassion not religious rituals, titles, or labels.

IX. So where does that leave us?

A. Well, if you have not ever understood yourself to be the person who has been beaten and is lying broken and helpless – and in need of rescue. And if you have not ever figured out that Jesus is the Good Samaritan – who will rescue you. I do hope you will reach out to him today.

B. If you already have, then I hope this story leaves you challenged – that is, I hope you hear the challenge Jesus makes and sign up for it.

C. You can imagine how the religious right of Jesus’ day heard this. It was offensive. And as you unpack it, it might leave you unsettled. Parables do that. But sometimes it takes that kind of approach to introduce the ideas that will then unpack.

X. Let me take a step back and return to the issues of the day.

A. I assume everyone agrees that things are not going well right now. That we can do better. But my sense is that:

1. There is not a lot of agreement on what better looks like;
2. and there are challenges out there for everyone.

B. Everyone I have talked to about George Floyd – everyone – believes that his slow death by suffocation under a police officer’s knee was horrific - an unacceptable and unthinkable injustice.

1. But then I get two kinds of articles sent to me
 - a) Some noting that Floyd was a volunteer church worker, who labored to stop youth violence, and who clearly blessed the lives of hundreds of people.
 - b) And others that report on his use of hard drugs and a police record that included pressing a gun against a pregnant woman’s belly while robbing her, and spending five years behind bars for assault and robbery?

C. Could the reality of George Floyd be both? Can we see that the situation is that complicated – just like my heart, and yours?

D. When we witness the looting and destruction that’s happened since May 25 can we not see:

1. Criminal behavior by opportunists, serving themselves at the expense of law-abiding citizens. Behavior that has to stop.

2. And the kind of desperate and destructive acts that grow up in communities that have seen too much injustice and hopelessness.
 3. Could something in both of these interpretations be true?
- E. When we consider the violence and poverty afflicting some inner-city neighborhoods:
1. Can those who believe that the major issue is that people are not bootstrapping themselves out of their conditions not see the need for more investment?
 2. And those who think what is needed is more money not see the hopelessness of fixing this problem when the inner city family is so often broken.
 3. And can those who want to blame the lack of family not see the generational cycles that are set up when so many black and Latino men are incarnated – the US has five percent of the population and twenty-two percent of the prison population.

XI. Let me be clear, I am not suggesting I have solutions to any of these problems. I am not suggesting that I sit in this spot where I can see things clearly. No. I do not believe that. What I believe is:

- A. We have problems – we have surfaced some pretty big issues in the last couple weeks. And we need to work on paths forward.
- B. The way forward is going to involve lots of people and lots of listening and be messy.
- C. And that it is a lot easier to see the log in someone else's eye than it is in your own.
- D. And that, we need to double down on our mission – of seeing people come to faith and be transformed by Jesus so that they can help transform our broken world.

XII. I can't put a bow on everything today. Not even close.

- A. I told you that I would be recommending some things to read and some things to do. I will call us to some next steps. I will. Not today.
- B. This feels like a listening and discerning moment. We have several small, low key next steps unfolding. I am hoping that larger opportunities – involving more people – emerge.
- C. I continue to hope that one of the things we will do is find ways for the attorneys in our congregation – and others – to promote Equal Justice Under Law.
 1. We can help when there is an abuse of authority or a violation of due process, especially when it results in a pattern of harassment or wrongful imprisonment.
- D. I continue to set PLEA in front of you – pray, listen, engage and acknowledge.
- E. Today I ask you to have the humility to approach these conversations with the Holy Spirit guiding you to ways you can help make this better.

¹ Jesus will pick Samaritans as the good guys on several other occasions – such as in Luke 17. The only leper who Jesus heals who returns to give thanks is a Samaritan.

² Leviticus 19:18 says that our neighbor is a fellow Jew. Jesus is contesting that.

³ Skye Jethani, With God devotionals, 9 Nov. 2014