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Stop, Luke and Listen: A Summer Sermon Series

6. Squirm Verses

Luke 10:25-37 Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" 26 He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" 27 He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." 28 And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." 29 But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" 30 Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. 31 Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. 32 So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33 But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. 34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. 35 The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' 36 Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" 37 He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

Squirm verses. That's what a friend of mine calls stories like this morning's parable of the Good Samaritan. And this story does seem to be a particularly squirmy one. I mean: you're sitting there, listening to the story read, following along in your bulletin or Bible, and you may find yourself tensing up just a wee little bit, wondering if you're about to get a load of guilt laid on you in the sermon, wondering if it would have been a better thing for your blood pressure to have just stayed in bed and read the paper. But let me confess something: the more I read the story of the Good Samaritan, the more *I* identify with the lawyer, and the less squirmy *I* feel about it! Why? Well, let

me ask you to try to hear this story as if you're hearing it for the first time. Try to put aside your notions about who good guys are and who the bad guys are. If you can do that, I think it becomes apparent that the lawyer is **not**, in fact, *baiting* Jesus, he's not the bad guy in this tale. For you see, in the Jewish context of Jesus' day, it would have been entirely **appropriate** for the lawyer to have raised the kinds of questions he did with Jesus; after all, Jesus is the new kid in town, the new teacher – and it makes sense to want to determine that this new teacher really is of God. Looked at that way, we realize that rather than being a setup, and rather than the lawyer being a bad guy, he's actually a **good** guy – one who is sincerely interested, sincerely religious, sincerely wanting to do the right thing before God. **That's** why he asks his question, not because he is out to “get” Jesus.

The lawyer asked “*Who is my neighbor*” and it IS an understandable question. Again: the lawyer in this story is indeed a good person; he knew the teachings and the law, he wanted to what was right. And yet here's the thing: he got frustrated. He was one person. He could look around him and see so many people in need and he knew that he couldn't begin to help even a fraction of them. He is a good man stretched too thin. Do you know that feeling? I do. Every day I get donation requests for cause after cause after cause – most of them good and deserving ones. I'll bet you do too. And yet if ALL of these folks are my “*neighbors*,” as the parable has it, then I might despair when I realize how seemingly little I can do. There's only one of me and so many of them. And so I don't know about you, but I **sympathize** with the lawyer's question – “Who **IS** my neighbor?!?” For in a way what he is really asking of Jesus was for some

guidelines, some criteria, by which he could know whom he should try to love and who he could justifiably leave for someone else. He's a *good* person wanting to know **HOW** to do good in a world of too much suffering. So, hearing this parable with fresh ears, I think we indeed ought to realize that that lawyer is in fact every one of us: he is you and me – wanting to be good and do good but feeling stretched awfully thin.

Someone once coined a term for this very state of being: **compassion fatigue**. The name sometimes fits doesn't it? I don't know about you, but sometimes I find myself a bit tired of all the appeals for good causes. And then I feel guilty because I feel tired. How about you? In the midst of such "compassion fatigue," in the midst of such a swirl of feelings about how to effectively address the needs of a much too needy world, don't you too find yourself asking that very same question that lawyer did: Who **IS** my neighbor" and the question "How much is enough?" Well, this morning, I want to suggest three approaches for answering those questions, three ways that we might both honestly face and yet also transcend that "compassion fatigue" that sometimes comes upon us all as we too try our best to know how to be a good neighbor.

First, you and I always need to remember that ***one is more than none***. *One is more than none*. What do I mean by that? Well, the sheer magnitude of the calamities and disasters that wreak havoc can tend to make us think of those affected as a mass, an aggregate, an abstraction. But they're not. They are individual men and women and children with unique lives and loves and stories. And the danger in finding yourself thinking of these folks as aggregates, as abstractions, is that it becomes both easy **not** to see them and to decide that your assistance can't possibly help because there are so

many. But that's not true. For **one is always more than none**. Some of you have heard the story of the starfish, but let me tell it again: On the ocean beach one day thousands of starfish were being washed up on shore, shriveling and dying in the hot summer sun. A man walks along the beach picking up starfish one by one and throwing each one back into the ocean. Another man comes along and said "*What possible difference does what you're doing make? What does it matter.*" And the man, picking up another and yet another starfish, says "*It matters to this one..... It makes a difference to that one..... It matters to this one....*" **One is more than none**. What you do matters to **this** one, to **that** one, to **this** one.... And your gift, your effort, your compassion **will** make a difference in one life – *and that is more than otherwise would have been.*

Let me offer a second guideline and criteria that's a little harder than the first. And, as I have told so many of you, sometimes the preacher is preaching first of all to himself because he needs to be reminded of it. But maybe it will fit you too. It is this: **You can often stretch further than you thought you could**. I once heard a preacher give a very powerful call to offering at a worship service, but one that was rather startling. She said this: "*Some of you have heard that you should 'give 'til it hurts.'* Well," she went on to say, "*I think that is not quite right. For after all, what if your mother had decided to give **only** until it hurt. None of you would be here! What if parents decided that they would give to their children **only** until it hurt?*" Well, put that way, her point became obvious: It wasn't that she was saying that the amounts that we

give are only right if they hurt us. But what she did mean with her startling, attention-getting image was two things: first, out of our own gratitude to God for what God has done for us, we ought always pay attention and stay aware of our tendencies **not** to let the hurt of others affect us. And it is easy to get a little jaded, isn't it? After all, you open the paper, or you turn on the television news, or follow your Twitter feed and Facebook page, and you are inundated with what is literally a world of hurt. It's hard, isn't it, not to sometimes tune it all out? But the parable's reminder is that everyone indeed is your neighbor. But the second thing that she meant was that sometimes you and I need to be reminded that we can do more, give more, than we thought I could. I know that often I am tempted to draw that line of what I can do in more restrictive ways than is in fact the case. Jesus calls me to stretch beyond what I thought I could do or give.

My third suggestion is a very practical one. And it may startle you. Or it may not, given that Walmart is already displaying, three and a half months ahead of time, their Halloween costumes. My email has been full this month of retailers having "Christmas in July" sales, and my third suggestion is this: **start thinking about your Christmas list now.** What do I mean? Well, I suspect that on your list, like mine, are children and parents, grandchildren and friends, co-workers and neighbors. What I'd like you to join me in doing is planning right now to add one extra person to your list. If you are shopping for your grandchildren, then add another grandchild to that list – one whom you don't know but who needs food, or clothing, or shoes, or even a toy. Maybe he or she is at the Tennyson Center, or in Black Forest or Moore, Oklahoma. Or if you are going to shop for your friends, then may I urge you to add one more friend to that list?

You won't know him or her, and he or she may be a refugee in the Middle East or the victim of a flood in the Midwest or a soldier a long way from home. But they are your neighbor too. When Barbara and I moved to Hawaii, we quickly learned that the Hawaiian language has the perfect word to sum up the story of the Good Samaritan: the word "*hanai*." That word denotes someone is like family, who really **is** family, family not by biology but by choice. And what our story this morning is telling us is that with God as our parent, we are all, whether near or far, hanai brothers and sisters. God has made us family with all kinds of people that we know and who are close by - **and** with all kinds of other people whom we will never meet. The good Samaritan put that man in the ditch on his list to give a gift to; will you join me in adding someone to your own gift list who needs you? You can give your gift through the church to Week Compassion and know that it will be used well indeed for your hanai family somewhere in God's good world. Or you can give your gift through any number of organizations that seek to help the hurt in our world. Will you join me in doing that?

So, three points by which we might address the "compassion fatigue" that we are all subject to: One is always more than none and even one gift makes a difference; always be mindful of how you can stretch your giving more than you think you can; and add one of your hanai brothers or sisters to your Christmas list. Now, none of these are magic. And because we are human we will still sometimes feel that inevitable fatigue at the amount of need facing us. And we will sometimes continue to get tired of being asked and stretched. But when we are feeling these things let us to try to remember the deepest point of the story of the Good Samaritan, and that is this: When all is said

and done, the Samaritan who helped that man is in fact a picture of God. And think about it: if you or I get fatigued sometimes in the face of need, imagine how God feels – it is **God** who every day sees every hurt in this world; **God** sees every life that has gotten itself into a ditch; **God** sees each and every beloved child whom life has beaten up. And yet God continues to care. God continues to try to bind up the wounds of each and every one. God continues to offer hope and healing to each and all. It is in fact **God** who ought to be suffering from compassion fatigue! But the good news, the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ, is that God does not. God does not give up. God's mercies are boundless and without limit. So, shall we, in our own ways, large and small, seek to follow God's example, going and doing likewise. Shall we?