

## Chapter Nine

### To Be or Not to Be a Good Samaritan

Like the Good Samaritan, may we not be ashamed of touching the wounds of those who suffer, but try to heal them with concrete acts of love.—Pope Francis

See if this sounds familiar. I was driving down the highway when I saw someone very slowly driving on the shoulder of the road. As I got closer, I saw their left rear tire was flat. They were cautiously trying to make it to an upcoming exit to stop and maybe get help in changing the tire. When I passed them, I thought to myself, *“Why didn’t I stop to help? That driver may not have known how to change a tire and I could have done that.”*

Feelings of guilt washed over me as I continued on my way. In fact, my guilt may have been stronger than most. After all, I work with a ministry that equips churches to mobilize their members to serve people in need. I preach about it, write about it (this book and a bi-weekly blog), dream about it: serving people in need has become the focus of my life. ***What a louse I am***, I thought. ***What a hypocrite!***

In the previous chapter I addressed the most common reasons cited for not serving people in need. One of those primary reasons is fear—fear of getting in over one’s head, fear of the unknown element in serving strangers, fear of an uncomfortable or potentially risky situation. Stopping to assist someone who appears to need help is a common occurrence and concern about doing so is widespread. Given that continuing discussion and the debate about the wisdom of intervention in potentially dangerous situations, I want to treat this concern about serving with special care.

It’s not hard to find people who argue that it is unwise to stop on the road to help someone who appears to be stranded or in difficulty. Likewise, it’s not hard to find others who argue just as vigorously that we should not refuse to help just because we don’t know what might happen. When

stories of “Good Samaritans” include harm coming to the helper—being injured or robbed or otherwise mistreated--the debate rages anew about whether to risk harm to help strangers along our way. I have no illusions about resolving this debate, but I do want to weigh in on it and leave you to make your own decision.

First, let’s review the term “Good Samaritan”. Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan when a scholar in Jewish law approached him asking what he had to do to have eternal life. Jesus asked the scholar to identify the core of the Jewish law: “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 “Love your neighbor as yourself,” he responded. Jesus agreed and the man asked, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus’s answer has become one of the best-known stories ever told—the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Here’s the story, updated for today:

A man was traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho when he was attacked by robbers. They beat him, robbed him, and left him to die. Soon, a priest came by and even though he saw the man, he hurried on without stopping to help. Later a preacher happened by. He saw the victim, and he, too, went on his way without stopping. Even later, a black man came that way. (For Jesus’s audience, a Samaritan was a cultural outsider for whom they had little or no regard: depending on who’s hearing this parable today, the “Samaritan” could be black or an Islamic jihadist or an BLM activist or anyone else who’s help would be unexpected or even unwanted.) When he saw the man lying beside the road, bloody, beaten, almost naked and near death, he had compassion on the man, and he stopped. He did what he could to bind up the man’s wounds, put him on his own donkey, and took him to a hotel. He paid for several day’s lodging and told the clerk he would be back in a week; if he owed any more, he would pay it.

When Jesus finished the parable, he asked his inquiring Jewish scholar which of the three men was a neighbor to the victim by the road and the scholar answered, “The one who had mercy on him.”

Jesus's response? "Go and do likewise." Our common cultural reference to the "good Samaritan" comes directly from this parable and the scholar's answer is precisely what the term means today—someone who stops to help a person in need, who shows mercy to a stranger. Now you know.

### **Asking the right question**

When deciding whether to stop to help someone in need, it matters what questions we ask. What will happen to me if I stop? Is there danger here I cannot see? Will the help I give be misused?

Why didn't the priest or preacher (Levite) in Jesus' parable not stop to help? Jesus doesn't tell us but from what we know of Jewish culture in the first century, they may have been concerned about being defiled by the wounded man. Touching this wounded man would have rendered them ceremonially unclean and therefore unable to carry out their religious responsibilities. Perhaps they were in a hurry and would be late for an important appointment if they stopped. Perhaps they were afraid or repulsed by the sight of the man's injuries.

The question the priest and Levite asked was *"If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?"* The Samaritan reversed the question: *"If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?"* Martin Luther King, Jr.

The best insight into this parable comes from Martin Luther King, Jr. He said the first question the priest and Levite asked was, *"If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?"* The Samaritan reversed the question: *"If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?"* Asking the right question made all the difference.

### **To serve is to be vulnerable**

We are averse to risk. We live in a culture that promotes self-protection--lock your car, avoid interaction with strangers, carry your keys in your hand in case you need quick entry into your car or a quick weapon, be aware of your surroundings at all times. We don't just lock our doors, we install a video security system. When we're home, we're safe but when we're away, our stuff is safe.

Without a doubt, we live in a more dangerous world than it was a few decades ago. Security has become a higher priority than it was for my parents or grandparents. Our fear of risk is a boon to the billion-dollar security business. But risk aversion is a barrier to serving.

Another way to talk about risk is in terms of vulnerability. If serving leads to risk and if serving requires us to push past the risk, then serving is a matter of allowing ourselves to be vulnerable. In her popular TED talk, “The Power of Vulnerability,” Brene’ Brown shares her discovery that vulnerability actually gives people a stronger sense of purpose and enhances their relationships. Years of research has confirmed that vulnerability is the key to authenticity. Brown found that people who allow themselves to be vulnerable “believe what makes them vulnerable also makes them beautiful.”<sup>i</sup>

Authenticity enables us to make meaningful connections with people and produces deep feelings of joy.

The biblical view of serving is to give of yourself to another without regard to safety. Authentic serving includes some level of vulnerability.

Can you see how being vulnerable can contribute to an attitude of serving? Allowing ourselves to be exposed to risk lends credibility to serving. Most serving does not require much vulnerability, but sooner or later we may encounter a need that requires more than we anticipated. That’s when compassion must be stronger than vulnerability. It was true for the Samaritan in Luke 10, and it’s true for us today. The biblical view of serving is to give of yourself to another without regard to safety. Serving is not a matter of convenience nor of being blessed by our service. Authentic serving includes some level of vulnerability.

### **The rest of the story**

This chapter began with a personal story of failure to serve when I chose not to stop to help a motorist with a flat tire. I felt guilty about not stopping, sufficiently guilty to say a short prayer asking God to forgive me and promising that if he would give me another opportunity, I would not pass by again. Less than thirty minutes down the road, I saw another stopped motorist. I exited at my first opportunity, turned around, went back and asked if I could help. He was pouring gas into his vehicle and

said he was okay, but he thanked me for stopping. We talked a few minutes and eventually, I went on my way without doing anything to help him. Nevertheless, he was grateful I stopped, and I was, too. When he thanked me for stopping, he noted that people don't do that anymore. As a former truck driver, he had seen plenty of instances in which people refused to stop.

So, I didn't help him. Or did I? If you think only of the material help the man needed—gas for his car—maybe not. But if you think of the encouragement my presence gave him, maybe so. He was grateful that I stopped and he said so several times. The fact that someone stopped—at least one of the hundreds of motorists who passed by—he was given hope, if only for a few minutes, that the road is not such an impersonal, uncaring place after all. We can never overestimate the power of hope.

Max and Rose Schindler tell their riveting story about surviving the Holocaust. Both were sent to concentrations camps as part of the Nazi effort to exterminate Jews. Their stories (told separately until they met after the war in England) are powerful testimonies of the power of hope. The subtitle of their book *Keeping Hope Alive While Surviving the Holocaust* summarizes how they were able to survive the horrific, inhumane treatments to which they were subjected. No human-driven event has caused more despair, hopelessness, and human tragedy than the Holocaust.

Max tells of one event that helped him keep hope alive and it confirms the power of compassion in the face of danger. Late in his experience of the Nazi genocidal program, when he was forced to move to a new camp because the Allies were closing in on the Nazis, Max was the unexpected recipient of kindness from a stranger:

“The food here is better than camp, but still not enough to sustain us. Men are weak and thin, sickly and have difficulty completing their jobs. There is a civilian German man here, the only one in all the places I have been during the war, who feels any concern for me. He sneaks me bread from his home.

This man is putting his life and mine at risk by giving me bread. We are very careful that no guards are watching when he hands it to me. I am dumbfounded by his courage and kindness.”<sup>ii</sup>

The unknown German civilian probably never thought about the parable of the Good Samaritan, yet he played the role perfectly. As a result, one man lived longer than he should have and remembered

long enough to tell the story. Now, the model of a vulnerable, risk-taking, compassionate stranger serving another stranger in desperate need continues to inspire us.

Someone asked the anthropologist Margaret Mead (1901-1978), "What is the first sign you look for to tell you of an ancient civilization?" The interviewer had in mind a tool or article of clothing. Ms. Mead surprised him by answering, a "healed femur". She explained that when someone breaks a femur, he can't survive to hunt, fish or escape enemies unless he has help from someone else. Thus, a healed femur indicates that someone else helped the injured one rather than abandoning him and saving themselves.

Isn't that what serving is about? Healing femurs of one sort or another? Stopping to help a stranger even when he's not someone we would usually include in our comfort zone? Giving bread to a starving prisoner? Risking our own safety when others are in need? That's the mark of a true compassionate.

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<sup>i</sup> Brene' Brown, TED Talk

<sup>ii</sup> M. Lee Connolly. *Two Who Survived: Keeping Hope Alive While Surviving the Holocaust*. MRS Publishing: San Diego, CA, 2019. p. 109.