



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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Expanding Our Love

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, July 10, 2016
The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Luke 10:25-37*

When was the last time your love was expanded? When was it that you were given a significant experience that caused the broadening and deepening of your love?

Perhaps it was at a summer camp when you learned that someone very different from yourself could become your very close friend; perhaps it was during an act of service—sponsored by your school, our church, or your business—when you co-joined someone's significant need with your equal and effective offering; perhaps it was an occasion when you began to see your faith differently, you began to see Jesus in a new light; perhaps it was when you were on a business trip, or serving in our homeless shelter, or teaching a child to swim, or tutoring a teenager, or visiting an art museum, or listening to exquisite music; perhaps it was when you discovered you were in love with another, or when you discovered you were gay, or when you discovered that you were called to be single; perhaps it was when you found yourself grieving by extension for someone who has experienced great loss—like the families of Philando Castile, Alton Sterling, and the police officers of Dallas.

Wherever and whenever it happened, we can detect the Holy Spirit hovering and nudging us ... bringing us closer to the living God. But we also have to be discerning when we begin to name God's presence in the Holy Spirit. I love the story of the traveling evangelist who would end his tent meetings with a great and dramatic crescendo. He would hire a young boy to climb up in the rafters with a dove. And when he announced in his sermon, "May God's very Spirit come down now!", the boy would toss down the dove and it would fly around the tent in glory. Well, this finale went very well for several months until one hot July night, he built that conclusion to its highest drama and called down the Spirit. But nothing happened! He called down the Spirit again, and still nothing happened! He looked up to the rafters, and the little boy in a cracked voice declared: "A yellow cat just ate the Holy Spirit ... do you want me to throw down the yellow cat?"

In today's gospel text we have a vivid demonstration of Jesus seeking to widen and deepen love.

In the midst of a compelling conversation with a local lawyer/professor, we hear the question: "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus then tells the timeless story which is now known as the "Parable of the Good Samaritan."

When people heard Jesus begin, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho," they knew this to be literally true. They also knew this journey was fraught with danger: it was commonly called "Robbers' Way." The road, like all winding mountainous journeys, was quite circuitous and narrow, with desert on either side. It was easy for robbers to slip in from the desert, assault and rob somebody, and then disappear back into the desert. The very story Jesus described was commonplace on this road and utterly familiar to his audience.

Thus, Jesus told of a man being robbed and left there, beaten and half-dead—he represents any person, by the way. Now, three familiar figures passed by where the stricken man was lying. Each one of them would have been easily recognizable to a Palestinian audience. There was a priest of the Temple, a Levite, a lay-leader of the Temple, and a Samaritan.

Notice in this parable — there are four kinds of people that the "every man" encounters.

First, the robbers.

They are the ones who cross over the line of civil and legal society; they cross over every person's right to safety and right of property. But surprisingly, Jesus shows no interest in why they beat and rob the man! He simply notices the event. Jesus does not dwell on their motive nor their excuse or reason.

Second, the religious leaders—the priest and Levite.

Jesus lumps the two together. They are seemingly the same person. Notice again, Jesus shows no interest in why they pass by on the other side. Now, there has been a great deal of speculation over the years about these two. But Jesus merely declares, "They passed by on the other side."

Third, the innkeeper.

He helps the hurt man because, I suppose, he had a duty as an innkeeper. He is a paid caregiver. He plays an important and humane role in this man's recovery and restoration. Also, it seems that the innkeeper trusts the Samaritan's word that he would return—to pay him the balance of the bill.

Finally, the Samaritan.

The Samaritan acts, Jesus says, according to compassion. Implying that somewhere along the way his love was expanded and enlarged. Jesus describes the man's action by using the familiar and powerful Greek word: *Splagama*, "The heart of mercy."

Now, I want us to notice a few more things about this text:

- + Jesus does not present the action of love in an idealistic fashion that no one could ever fulfill. Some commentators have ruined this parable by presenting what we would call "overreach";
- + The event presents some interruption and inconvenience;
- + A reasonable amount of risk is expected;
- + A fairly small portion of finances is required;
- + A certain amount of first aid is administered;
- + And, a measured amount of commitment is needed for follow-up.

Notice also:

- + The Good Samaritan does not enter into a blame-and-shame attitude;
- + He doesn't expect nor call upon others to necessarily assist;
- + He doesn't give away his life-savings;
- + And, parents, he doesn't invite the man to move in with him for the rest of his life!

This parable presents an expanded and doable love! An ordinary person can do this!

Jesus realistically portrays the good effect of mercy and love.

In this parable, Jesus has broadened and enlarged the definition of love. He shows us the way that love reaches beyond daily routine and narrow boundaries. He portrays this broadening as something God has instilled in the heart of the Samaritan ... It caused him to care for presumably a Jew.

The most distinctive and surprising item to notice about the parable is the element of surprise. Jesus' story had the lawyer so enthralled that his defenses were down. Precisely at that moment, Jesus shocked the life out of the lawyer by saying to him it was the Samaritan who reacted humanely, even heroically, in that situation. Then Jesus says to the lawyer, "Now, go and do likewise."

Most of you know the story and teaching of *Les Misérables* — with text by Victor Hugo and the Broadway musical scores by Kretzmer, Boublil, and Schönberg.

The core of the story is about Inspector Javert ... a lonely, confined and rageful person. He's interested in justice but fails to realize that genuine justice is finally grounded in love and mercy and forgiveness. So he is a tragic figure.

The other main character is Jean Valjean. He is a decent man sentenced to five years' imprisonment in the galleys for stealing a loaf of bread to feed his sister's seven children; several escape attempts stretch his sentence out to nineteen years. Hatred of society's injustice toward him breeds hatred of God's cruelty, and Jean Valjean leaves prison a hard and bitter soul. One of the great transformative moments is in Bishop Bienvenu's house. The bishop represents God's grace and mercy when he utters to Jean Valjean: "I have bought your life for God." It was at that moment that Jean Valjean's love was expanded, and his life was transformed. Jean Valjean is then able to reach beyond his old prescribed boundaries.

During the story, Jean Valjean changes his name, he begins to take care of Cosette, his employer's daughter, and then finally he faces an injustice of a man wrongfully accused of the crime he committed. It was at that moment that he sings the penetrating lyrics of "Who Am I?"

"Who am I? Can I condemn the man to slavery? Pretend that I do not see his agony? This innocent who wears my face, who goes to judgment in my place? Who am I? Can I conceal myself for evermore, pretend that I am not the man I was before? And must my name until I die be no more than an alibi? Must I lie? How can I ever face my fellow men? How can I ever face myself again? My soul belongs to God ... I know I made a bargain long ago, he gave me hope when hope was gone, he gave me strength when strength was gone." And then he pushes through the final boundary -- He faces Inspector Javert and says: "I am Jean Valjean!"

God expands our love by loving us first, and then enlarging our vision and expanding our heart, and by making the actions of love doable. It begins in Baptism and unfolds for the rest of our days.

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