

**“Identifying with the Victim”**  
**Luke 10:25-37**  
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Perspective makes a great deal of difference when we read a book or view a film. Whom we identify with most in a story shapes the manner in which we hear it. For example, my favorite film, *Doctor Zhivago*, tells a magnificent tale about history, relationships and the search for meaning, all framed in the context of magnificent settings with incredible writing, directing, acting and cinematography. For many men it is also a love story, but for most women and some men this part of the story is all too real but not very romantic because while Yuri falls madly in love with Lara and she with him, he is already married. From one perspective, maybe this is “O.K.” – there is a war going on, some rationalize – but from another perspective, it is problematic.

Perspective or point of view makes a difference in how we hear a story. Such is the case with the familiar story we have read from Luke 10, what we know as the Parable of the Good Samaritan. With whom do we identify in this story – the priest, the Levite or the Samaritan? There are times when we pass by someone who might be in need for reasons that make sense to us. And there are times when we respond to a specific need whether there are risks in doing so or not. So, depending on where we are, we may identify with the priest, the Levite or the Samaritan and thus we may have very different reactions to Jesus’ story.

But no matter which of these characters we identify with more, we can all identify with the victim and seeing the story through his eyes gives us a very different perspective. We may not have been robbed and beaten, but we have all ended up in a ditch at some point in life. We have all been the one in desperate need of help. And thus, we can identify with this man, seeing things as he sees them.

During our time in Warrenton, I had an experience in which I recognized my need for help. I learned one evening that one of our folks who lived near the lake had died suddenly. I ventured out to see his

family immediately. I had been to their home before, but it had been some time, and some of the roads to and around the lake were poorly marked especially for those travelling after dark. I thought I was going the right way, but then I thought I might have missed a turn. So, I pulled into the parking lot of a real estate agency to look at my map. This was before the advent of cell phones, the internet and easy access to GPS.

Anyway... rather than stopping the car, turning on an interior light and reading the map, like any intelligent person would have done, I turned on the light, pulled out the map and kept driving through the lot - that is, until I ended up in a ditch! Nothing but my ego was injured, but I was unsettled, stuck in a ditch on a dark night off a deserted road when I was needed elsewhere! Fortunately for me, it was not long before several people came along and offered help, while laughing a bit at my story. The good news was I drove a Toyota Tercel which did not weigh very much, but I could not get it out of the ditch alone. I needed help.

The men who stopped to help me took a certain kind of risk. They didn't know me or what I was up to - it could have been a trap - and once they got me out of that ditch, I might have driven into another one. But they stopped, nonetheless, and I was glad they did.

We have all been in a ditch of one kind or another. We have all needed the help of others. Our vehicle may have broken down, our marriage may have fallen apart, our position may have been cut in the process of corporate downsizing or restructuring, our depression or addiction may have gotten out of control – there are many different kinds of ditches to fall into, many different ways to end up in need. But we all get there at some point and because we do, we can identify with the victim in Jesus' parable. Whether he bears some responsibility for travelling down a dangerous road alone or not, he is in a vulnerable position we can understand. And so, we can identify with him.

Such identification with the victim is important in and of itself because it reveals self-awareness and it creates space for humility and gratitude. There is an old *Ziggy* cartoon in which our little friend looks down at a man lying in the gutter who appears to be drunk and says, "There but for the grace of God go I," at which point the man in the gutter looks up at Ziggy and says, "There but for the grace of God go I."

It is tempting to look down on the neediness of others because we think their condition is so much more deplorable than ours, but we are all needy. We are all paupers. It's just a matter of which part of our life is impoverished. Before God especially we are all in need of grace. Recognizing our true condition reduces the possibility of arrogance, it humbles us, and it makes us grateful for the human aid we have received and even more so the Divine grace that sustains us.

But identifying with the victim in this story not only humbles us and makes us more grateful; it provides motivation to fulfill our calling which is named at the end of the story. A lawyer wants to know who his neighbor is; he wants to be able to limit his love. So, Jesus tells a parable wherein an unknown man is stripped and beaten by robbers, then left in a ditch to die. A priest and a Levite pass by the man without helping, but a Samaritan, a dreaded outsider, stops to help.

The point seems obvious, if unsettling, for the lawyer. There are no limits on whom we are called to love; in fact, the person we least want to help may end up helping us. So, Jesus asks the lawyer which character in the story was a neighbor to the man in need. The lawyer says, "The one who showed him mercy." He can't even say the word "Samaritan" in his reply. He can't explicitly name him as a good guy. But Jesus lets this go for now. He simply says, "Go and do likewise." That is his calling and ours – to extend mercy to whomever is in need.

That can be difficult to do if we think the person in need falls into some category of people outside our concern. That can be difficult to do if we blame the victim for his/her challenges. And one way to try and overcome these barriers to love is simply to underscore the reality that this is a teaching of Jesus and thus we ought to do it anyway!

It's a bit like something we say as parents. After hearing various arguments from our children about why they shouldn't have to do something we have asked them to do, and after answering all reasonable questions, we finally say – just do it because I said so. I am your father; you don't need another reason!

Surely Jesus can pull some weight here. He commands us to love our neighbor and so we should. And so we should... but sometimes mere obligation is not enough. Realizing that we have been the one in

desperate need at some point can provide added motivation. We know what this feels like. We can identify with the victim, even if we don't like the victim, even if we blame the victim. And so, we can help.

It is a kind of motivation we find in scripture. Leviticus 19:33-34 says, "When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God." The faithful are to welcome immigrants because they were once immigrants in a foreign land; at least their forbearers were.

It is just one of many verses that make this claim, a claim that speaks to current challenges in our nation. Other than Native Americans, we were all immigrants in this land at one time or at least our forbearers were. But the motivation for compassion in these texts is clear – those who have needed help before, which is all of us, should willingly help those who are in need now. Not only that, we should do so in a different spirit – not in judgment and condescension but with kindness and compassion – for we know what it feels like to need help.

I think of the Sunday morning a woman was lying down, passed out in our doorway here at church. The reasonable thing to do would have been to have awakened her and asked her to move on, but one of our members decided to do something else – figure out what she needed and get her help. In the end, several people got involved. The woman was coming down from a high. She needed treatment. So, she was given some water, surrounded by kind people and then taken to a treatment center. We don't know what happened after that – very often we don't know how a story ends - but we do know that this group of FBC members went and did likewise in response to Jesus' command. They extended mercy to someone in need and they did so without judgment but with kindness and compassion.

I don't know what motivated those who helped that morning, and in the end that doesn't matter as much as the fact that they did, but the more we recognize our true condition of need and thus are able to identify with those who suffer, the more willing we will be to help and the more capable of doing so in the right spirit.