

A Collision of Mercy

Luke 10:25-37

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

March 9, 2025/First Sunday of Lent

Today is the first Sunday of Lent.

As you have heard (and perhaps have seen on the cover of your bulletins), the theme we are exploring this year is called “Christ Collides.”

Each week during Lent, the texts and themes will explore how Jesus’ teachings, his interactions with others, his actions, and his stories collide with us and with our world.

It’s an abrupt, even violent visual. The image on the bulletin conveys a kind of shattering or breaking apart.

We will see (not for the first time!) that Jesus has a way of breaking apart our assumptions and expectations, our “taken-for-granted” and our defaults.

But we will also see that Jesus doesn’t just break things apart. Colliding with Christ also involves a putting back together, a remaking, a reorienting, even a liberating.

When we collide with Jesus, we are better for it, even if it may be painful or disorienting or confusing in the moment.

Throughout Lent, you’ll likely notice that the texts are not the typical ones you usually hear during Lent.

The writers of this resource have chosen to use texts from what is called the Narrative Lectionary as opposed to the more familiar Revised Common Lectionary that is used by churches around the world.

The Narrative lectionary has only been around for around fifteen years, and as you might guess, it is a way of arranging weekly readings that is meant to move readers through the

whole biblical narrative from Genesis to Revelation. So, instead of an OT, NT, Psalm and Epistle each week, as in RCL, the Narrative Lectionary moves through the story more or less in order.

Both have strengths and weaknesses. But in the interests of time, that's all I'm going to say about that. I just wanted to explain why, for example, we're not hearing about Jesus' temptation in the wilderness on the First Sunday of Lent.

The Narrative Lectionary texts for Lent have us in the gospel of Luke (which you may recall is also where we spent Advent). Of the four gospels, Luke might be my favourite.

It has the most detailed birth narratives of the four gospels. It perhaps uniquely emphasizes Jesus' concern for the poor, women, outsiders of all kinds.

And Luke alone contains a few of Jesus' most well-known parables. Like the one you just heard.

Today's collision is between Jesus and an "expert in the law."

This expert comes to Jesus with a big question. The biggest question, you might say. What must I do to inherit eternal life?

"What do you think?" Jesus asks him. "How do you read the law? You're the 'expert,' right?"

The scholar dutifully recites the twin commands to love God and neighbour that form the heart of the Jewish law.

"Sounds good," Jesus says. "Go do that."

But he wanted to justify himself, Luke says.

(There's a sermon or two in those six words alone! How often are the things we say and do an attempt to justify ourselves?)

The expert wanted to justify himself and so he asked, "and who, exactly, is my neighbour?"

We know the rest of the story. Jesus doesn't answer his question. He doesn't tell give him a nice tidy list of all the people who fit into the box of "people I must love to be a good person and inherit eternal life."

Rather, he tells him a story with a hated Samaritan showing a Jewish religious expert what love of neighbour looks like.

He tells him a story that turns an enemy into an example.

The "expert" in the law came to Jesus looking to justify himself, to secure his own eternal status, and to draw boundaries around the group of people that he had to concern himself with.

Jesus flips all that on its head with a story—and a story that cast a guy from about the most undesirable category of people that the expert in the law could think of in the starring role.

And it is this Samaritan who shows the religious expert how far love reaches. He tends to a wounded man on the side of the road—a man who was ignored by a priest and a Levite, these pillars of Jewish piety in the first century.

The Samaritan simply sees a man bleeding on the side of the road, and he tends to his wounds. He goes even beyond this, ensuring that the man will be cared for at his own expense even after he has gone.

That's what a neighbour looks like, Jesus says.

Jesus obviously collides with the biases of the expert in the law in this story. This guy, like most Jews, likely had a whole bunch of assumptions about Samaritans, few of them positive. Maybe none of them.

And Jesus smashes all these biases to pieces with a story. He does it for the expert in the law and he does it for us.

I think we would be failing on a spectacular level if we were to hear this story and not ask the question, "Who occupies the category of 'Samaritan' in my life?"

I can't answer that question for you. But I can encourage you to ask it.

Because I know that we, too, have our biases. We all have people or groups of people who, even if we would never say it out loud, we secretly think are uniquely terrible, who we think are beneath us, who we could never imagine teaching us a lesson of any kind.

And here, Jesus collides with us, too. He challenges our biases. And he reminds us of a deep truth and a common need that transcends all our self-serving categories.

After he tells his story, Jesus asks the Pharisee, "Which of these three [the priest, the Levite, and the Samaritan] do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

The expert in the law responds, "The one who had mercy." And Jesus simply says, "Go and do likewise." Go and show mercy.

What Jesus says to the expert in the law, he says to us, too. Go and show mercy.

Our world is very short on mercy these days, it seems to me.

It is becoming a truism to say that we live in angry and polarized times. We all know this. I suspect we all feel this, at least on some level.

In our time, we are prone to sorting ourselves into the categories of "clean" and "unclean" or "righteous" and "unrighteous" according to our political views. Perhaps you've noticed an uptick in this in recent weeks?

For us, categories like "progressive" and "conservative" take the place of "Jew" and "Samaritan." And our hatreds and suspicions can run just as deep.

In this context, what would it mean for followers of Jesus to cultivate a genuine posture of mercy? What would it look like for mercy to be our default setting in our interactions with those who don't think like us?

What would it look like for our first instinct toward the person whose stupid opinions make our blood boil to be one of mercy? What would it look like for us to see a human being in need underneath the ideas and behaviours that so bother us?

There's a well-known saying, attributed to nineteenth century Scottish minister: "Be kind, for everyone is going through a battle that you know nothing about."

I think we would do well to remember this. It might help us to be more merciful.

That conservative acquaintance of yours whose politics you can't stand? They might be struggling to cope with the pace of change in the modern world. Their kid might be struggling, and they feel powerless to help them. They need your mercy.

That super-woke co-worker that drives you nuts with their endless moralizing commentary? Maybe they're just desperately searching for a story to give their lives meaning and belonging. Maybe their marriage is falling apart. They need your mercy.

Pick your example. Chances are good that whoever your "Samaritan" is, they likely have some hard things going on under the surface that you can't see and may never know about.

And even if they're not—even if their life is magically (and implausibly) going perfectly, they still need mercy. We all need mercy.

Remember, "showing mercy" is the answer Jesus gives to the expert in the law's question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Mercy is not some optional extra for the super-committed Christians. It's not something we ought to get around to someday once Jesus has had some time to refine our character.

It's life and death. Eternal life, if we take Jesus seriously. Indeed, Jesus seems to care more that we show mercy than that we get our ideas sorted out. We should ponder this more deeply than we often do.

In the ninth chapter of Matthew's gospel, Jesus gives the Pharisees an assignment. Quoting the prophet Hosea, he says, "Go and learn what this means: I desire mercy and not sacrifice."

It's an assignment the Pharisees struggled mightily with. It's an assignment that we still struggle with.

Today, Jesus collides with our self-righteousness, our pride, our biases, our stereotypes, our need to have an enemy to define ourselves against, our impulse to justify ourselves, our desire to have a manageable set of boundaries around the people we are called to love...

And out of that collision comes a simple call.

Have mercy.

It is mercy that will save our souls. In the receiving and, perhaps just as importantly, in the giving.

May we hear Jesus's story. May we, like the expert in the law, come—again and again—to the conclusion that a neighbour is the one who shows mercy.

And may we go and do likewise.

Amen.

