

The Good Undocumented Immigrant

Luke 10:25-37

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It was Thanksgiving day in 2007—Dawn Alice Tomko and her 9-year-old son, Christopher Buztheitner, were camping near Peña Blanca Lake, 60 miles southwest of Tucson, Arizona. Christopher's stepfather had died two months earlier, and they were looking for a new Thanksgiving tradition that wouldn't remind them as much of their recent loss.

They were traveling down a narrow dirt road, about 12 miles north of the border, when disaster struck. Blinded by the late afternoon sun, Tomko drove over a cliff, plunging 100 feet into a canyon. Christopher crawled out of the van, but his mother was pinned and badly hurt. So he went for help.

The boy was wandering, disoriented and distraught, when Jesus Manuel Cordova found him. Cordova could have walked on. It's what a lot of people in this country would have expected him to do. After all, Cordova was an undocumented immigrant. He was two days into his walk across the desert of southern Arizona that stretches between Nogales and Tucson. To stop, or even to slow down to offer assistance was to risk arrest and the loss of the income he was hoping to earn and send to his family in Mexico. He could have walked on.

"I am a father of four children. For that, I stayed," Cordova later said through an interpreter. "I never could have left him. Never." (Amanda Lee Myers, Associated Press)

The boy spoke no Spanish and Cordova spoke no English. But the language of desperation is easily understood, and Cordova went with the boy and was there with him when his mother died.

Cordova stayed with Christopher that night, building a fire and sharing his jacket with the child who had on only a T-shirt and shorts. He stayed with the boy the next morning, when hunters found them and called for help. Border Patrol Agents were the first to respond.

Cordova stayed though he must have known the consequences, and he saved that boy.

"He was not going to leave this little boy alone," said Tony Estrada, the sheriff of Santa Cruz county. "He understood what it would mean to be there. He obviously made a tremendous sacrifice."(Laurie Roberts, The Arizona Republic)

As Christopher was airlifted to Tucson, Jesus Manuel Cordova was taken into custody and escorted back across the border.

What I just told you was a true story, reported in several newspapers in Arizona, and eventually picked up by the Associated Press. But the fact that it's true doesn't mean that it might not also be a parable. In fact, it's a lot like one of the parables that Jesus told in Luke, chapter 10.

25 On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

26 "What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"

27 He answered: " '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.'"

28 "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."

29 But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

"Who is my neighbor?" was a loaded question for anyone living in Judea in those days. The Jewish people had fought fiercely to maintain their own cultural and religious identity both during the exile and under the rule of foreign nations. For many of them, "neighbor" meant only other Jews, or maybe even only other Jews in their sect or social class. The legal expert was putting Jesus on the hot-seat. And so, he told a story:

30 "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead.

This story begins with an unnamed man. Most of the people in the audience that day would have assumed that he was Jewish, just as they were Jewish, but Jesus doesn't give us any hints about his ethnicity. Jericho was only 17 miles away from Jerusalem, but it was all downhill. The road was narrow and cut through such rugged terrain that bandits could easily hide and ambush travelers along the way. In addition to being robbed, this particular man was stripped of all clothing that might have identified him as a member of a particular people group. Without clothing, it would have been impossible for others to tell whether this victim was one of their own or not.

31A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. 32So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

These men were religious leaders, not unlike the expert in the law whose questions prompted this story in the first place. And seeing the nameless, faceless stranger, they passed over to the far side of the road and left him there. I'm sure they had their reasons. Maybe they thought it was a set-up, that the man on the side of the road was a member of one of those groups of robbers lying there as bait to take advantage of anyone who showed mercy. Maybe they were worried about their own purity. The man was half-dead, and from a distance, the difference between half-dead and all-dead can be hard to see. Coming into contact with a corpse would put them on the wrong side of their purity laws and sideline them temporarily from performing their duties in the temple. Something has definitely gone wrong in the world when what we think is our Christian duty prevents us from ministering to the people right in front of us.

Maybe the priest and the Levite were just in a hurry to get home. Jesus says that they were on their way *down* the road, from Jerusalem to Jericho. They had been serving in the temple and were tired. They could have easily thought, "We've been serving the Lord all day. Let someone else deal with this one." Whatever their reasons were, the final verdict is that their concept of neighbor wasn't broad enough to include this man that might or might not have been Jewish. But luckily for the man, there was still one more traveler on the road:

33But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was;

The instant Jesus said the word Samaritan, the audience would have recoiled. Samaritans were the punchlines of most of the good jokes. I'm sure they were the bogeymen in political ads as well. "Vote Caiaphas, he's tough on Samaritans." No Jewish person would have thought of a Samaritan as neighbor. When the Samaritan entered the story, the audience would have expected him to kick at the stripped man or look to see if there was any spare change the robbers might have missed, but the Samaritan acted in a way they would never have expected:

when he saw him, he took pity on him. 34He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. 35The next day he took out two silver coins^[e] and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'

The Samaritan did for the wounded man exactly what any of us would have wanted done for us. He redeemed what had been broken and lost. The robbers beat, robbed and left the man for dead, but the Samaritan took care of his wounds, brought him to a safe place, and promised that he would return. And he did all of this in spite of the same risks that had faced the priest and the Levite. He knew that other robbers might be lurking, and even if the man wasn't being used as bait, trying to transport him all the way to Jericho would have made him an easy target. The Samaritan probably wouldn't have been as concerned with issues of purity, but he had to be concerned with what people would think when he arrived in Jericho with this wounded man. A Jewish community that thought the worst of Samaritans was liable to accuse him of having beaten the man himself. And yet despite those risks, the Samaritan helped him anyway. He loved his neighbor as himself.

Telling the story of a good Samaritan in Jesus' day, would be like telling the story of a good Palestinian in modern-day Israel, or a good Muslim in the days just after September 11th, or a good undocumented immigrant today. It was a shocking story for the audience, and just to make sure they understood the point, Jesus asked one more question:

36"Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

There was only one answer: *"The one who had mercy on him."* To which Jesus responded, *"Go and do likewise."*

The legal expert was stunned. He had asked Jesus whom he was supposed to love like a neighbor. He was expecting a concrete answer like, your fellow Jews, but instead, Jesus told a story in which the point was that it's the love in our hearts that makes someone else a neighbor. Without love, all of us are strangers, like the man lying on the side of the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. There was nothing in that man that made him a neighbor. There was no warm hello. There was no clothing that identified him as belonging to a certain race or social class. There was no previous knowledge of him that could classify him as a good man or a bad man. He was simply there, a stranger to the world. He was certainly a stranger to the Priest and to the Levite.

But to someone with enough love in his heart, that stranger was a neighbor. He was someone worth taking risks for, someone worth loving. The question for us is this: "When we look at the world around us, do we see more strangers or neighbors?" That's an important question, because the way we answer it reveals more about the heart inside of us than it does about the world around us. Do we have the kind of love that turns strangers into neighbors?

If we're followers of Christ, then we should. The nameless victim isn't the only stranger in this parable. A Samaritan on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho was just as much a stranger, journeying through hostile territory. I believe that Jesus told this story with a Samaritan as its hero not just to shame those who should have known better, but also to remind us that we discover our love for the stranger—that love that turns strangers into neighbors—when we remember that we were all once strangers ourselves. Strangers who were treated like neighbors, and even like sons and daughters by God. While we were yet unborn, while we were yet nameless and faceless everywhere but in the mind of God, Christ died for us. And we're called to love our neighbors as we have been loved. And we know it. But knowing it isn't enough. When Jesus first turned the tables on the legal expert, he didn't just ask what was written in the law; he asked, "How do you read it?" All of us can look through this book and spout out answers, but how do we read it?

In the end, Jesus says, we read it, not with our lips, but with our lives. Go and do likewise, Jesus says. The kingdom of God isn't about how much we know but about how much of it we live. If we see more strangers than neighbors in this world, the problem isn't with the world. It's with us. And we need to come before God and repent for having lost sight of his love and mercy. And it goes beyond what we think or how we see. Do we treat the people that God puts in our paths like strangers, cutting a wide berth around them? Or do we engage them redemptively like neighbors, binding up their wounds, bringing them to safety, and promising to return? How do you read it?