



Bible study: 'Distancing' and the good Samaritan

Jesus replied, 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.'

Luke 10:30–32 (ESV)

Reflection

Distancing. This has been the buzzword for a safety measure to help control the spread of Covid-19 and save lives. So-called 'physical distancing' can range from keeping a proper distance from others in public places to avoiding mass gatherings altogether by staying at home.

In Luke 10:25–37, Jesus tells a story of another kind of 'distancing'. He shares the parable about a man who was robbed and left for dead, and about how two notable religious figures, a priest and a Levite, passed by and kept their distance. Bible scholars would note that the two must have thought that the beaten man was dead and they had better avoid contact in case the corpse rendered them ritually unclean according to Jewish ceremonial laws (cf Leviticus 22:4). The man would surely have died if not for a Samaritan who proved compassionate enough to come to his rescue and take him to an inn.

In the context of Covid-19, we can see comparisons and contrasts with this story. On the one hand, it is telling us that we need to go beyond concern for our own personal safety and look to the welfare of others as well. On the other hand, we need to consider that we might



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be carrying the virus without knowing it. So, in today's context, this story is not telling us that, in order to be good Samaritans, we should disregard prescribed physical distancing measures put in place to prevent the spread of the virus. However, the story challenges us to reimagine the ways we can 'love our neighbours as we love ourselves' (Luke 10:27) in the midst of this pandemic.

While it's important that we contribute to collective efforts to 'flatten the curve', including by observing proper physical distancing from people, this should not make us socially disconnected. This is where the story of the good Samaritan poses a timely challenge: Are we neighbourly enough to remember the plight of the most vulnerable in our communities? The homeless who can't stay home because they have no home to begin with; day labourers in the informal sector who cannot work from home and will be badly hit by city-wide lockdowns. Let us keep in mind that many

vulnerable people will bear the brunt of physical distancing policies that are made with good intentions but in some situations are virtually impossible to abide by for those living in extreme poverty (eg in a refugee camp).

In Jesus' story of the good Samaritan, the Samaritan did not have to be concerned about giving the man on the street a deadly disease such as Covid-19. Rather, the only risk to the Samaritan was financial cost. The Samaritan in Jesus' story is celebrated because instead of acting selfishly, he acts selflessly and prioritises care for the man on the street.

Obeying 'distancing' guidelines in order to help 'flatten the curve' is part of our role of being good neighbours. But the challenge of Jesus for us today is to be 'good Samaritans': to think of the vulnerable people in our midst, perhaps those who are different from us and are having a very different experience from us at the moment, and consider what additional steps can be taken to care for them in the midst of this crisis. Doing this in ways that don't undermine wider prevention efforts is possibly challenging and complex, but it is an important part of the Christian response.

Reflection questions

1. In the Luke 10 story, the Samaritan models what it means to be a 'neighbour'. Why is it significant and challenging that Jesus specifically uses a Samaritan in this story?
2. In Jesus' story, there is a naked man who has been robbed and is lying on the side of the road. In the context of Covid-19 and of your local neighbourhood, who is in a similar situation to this vulnerable person?
3. What are the ways that taking care of yourself during Covid-19 can also mean taking care of others' safety?
4. What role can your church play in helping those who are particularly vulnerable to protect themselves during the Covid-19 pandemic?

Prayer

Lord, help us to reach out in different ways to support those who cannot protect themselves. We ask for your protection over them – and over us. Amen.