

+ Luke 10:25-37 + Unexpected Love + 8th Sunday after Pentecost + 19 July 2015 +

How do you respond to the unexpected? Were you ever caught off-guard by something somebody did or something somebody said? You didn't expect to have that co-worker open up to you like that. You didn't expect your dear friend to do that. You didn't expect to hear from that loved one. You didn't expect that classmate to respond that way. You didn't expect. You didn't see it coming—and you were caught off-guard.

When you're caught off-guard like that, you may not know how to respond. You're left speechless. You don't know what to say because you just didn't see it coming and your mind is trying to process it all. It doesn't necessarily have to be something bad. It happens with very good surprises too. For example, you sinned against a loved one—really offended them, and yet they still tell you, "I forgive you and I love you." Based on what you did, you didn't see that unexpected love coming.

You wonder if the expert in the Old Testament law who confronted Jesus felt the same way when Jesus showed him unexpected love. The conversation hadn't started that way. The expert had thought he could guide the conversation down the path he expected. He had asked Jesus, ***"Teacher...what must I do to inherit eternal life?"***

Now this expert wasn't asking because he didn't know. He knew the answer. He made his living studying every detail of the first five books of the Old Testament. No, he wanted to test this Galilean teacher, who claimed to be God, because Jesus taught that you could not earn God's favor.

You see, this expert, like so many others, had lost what was at the heart of God's Law. He had forgotten that it all starts with God's love. This expert thought he could inherit eternal life through keeping the Law properly, when in reality, apart from Christ, that's impossible. That rubbed this expert the wrong way. So he put Jesus to the test.

Of course, Jesus knew what this foolish expert was doing. After all, he is the all-knowing God, but Jesus also embodied God's unexpected love. He didn't slam the expert, but simply asked him, ***"What is written in the Law? How do you understand the words?"*** The man answered with familiar words from Scripture, ***"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.'"***

"You have answered correctly...Do this and you will live." Now Jesus wasn't telling this expert that he could earn heaven. Instead Jesus was showing him tough, unexpected love. Jesus was pointing the harsh reality of the Law right at the heart of his listener. "Yes, you have answered correctly, but there is no possible way you have loved the Lord your God perfectly with your entire heart, mind, body and soul, and there is no way you have loved your neighbor as much as you have loved yourself. The only way you are going to earn eternal life is by doing all that perfectly. You've fallen short and you will never measure up to God's holy standard."

The expert didn't expect that kind of an answer from Jesus. It caught him off-guard. So he quickly tried to justify himself by trying to find a loophole in Jesus' answer. ***"And who is my neighbor?"*** The expert expected a very narrow kind of love exclusive to his friends and those like him. Of course, Jesus had a completely unexpected answer for the expert—and for us—about God's unexpected love for our "neighbor." So he told a story.

There was a certain Jewish man who had finished some business in the city of Jerusalem. From there he planned to make the 20-mile trip down the very steep road to the city of Jericho. It was the shortest route, but also the most dangerous. The roadway cut steeply through a desert region, where there were few homes and no villages. Ledges of rock and caves abounded, giving robbers and criminals ample places to hide.

The man was traveling alone ***"when he fell into the hands of robbers."*** To a band of thieves he was the perfect target. They ambushed the man from the shadows. There was no way he could fend them all off so they quickly overtook him. They took everything he had, even the clothes on his back. They beat him within an inch of his life and fled leaving the man lying in a ditch bloody, battered, and fading in and out of consciousness. He had little to cover him as the hot sun beat down.

Time passed and a priest from the temple in Jerusalem came by on the road. He had just finished his service in the temple and was on his way home. As a priest, he was likely a well-respected, model citizen in the Jewish community. On the way, he noticed the bloody man in the ditch. "Should I help him? I could, but what if the bandits are still around? Better to be safe than sorry. In fact, I'll avoid him altogether. Let someone else help

him.” So the priest **“passed by on the other side.”** He quickly disappeared in the distance, leaving the battered victim behind.

More time passed and a Levite from the temple in Jerusalem soon approached the man in the ditch. This Levite assisted with the various duties around the temple grounds, but he had business to tend to outside of Jerusalem. He, too, was a well-respected man in the Jewish community. He, too, noticed the bloody man in the ditch. “Should I help him or not? I could, but then I’d be late and who knows if the robbers are waiting around here! I really should just keep going. Let someone else help him.” So the Levite quickly **“passed by on the other side”** so he wouldn’t be late.

Time passed and the day grew late. Without medical care, the man’s condition worsened. **“But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him.”** Those who should’ve helped this Jewish man avoided him, but help came from one whose help was not expected. The Jews had long hated the Samaritans and the Samaritans had long hated the Jews. Surely the Samaritan had better excuses than the priest or Levite. If the roles were switched, the Jewish man probably would not have helped the Samaritan, but the Samaritan’s heart went out to the injured man. He had to do something to help the victim.

Without hesitation the Samaritan accepted the risk, the delay, and the cost—none of which the victim’s own countrymen were willing to sacrifice. In fact, the Samaritan took the man’s care to another level. He used wine to clean out the wounds and poured olive oil on them to start the healing. He heaved the dead weight of the stranger up on his donkey and took him to a local inn to continue his care. He sacrificed time and two days’ wages for a man he had never met from a people known to be his sworn enemies. He even told the innkeeper, **“Look after him...and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.”** Why did he do it? Jesus doesn’t tell us, but his unexpected compassion and mercy are pretty clear.

The expert in the Law didn’t expect that kind of response from Jesus—a response that surely thundered God’s condemnation in his own ears. How self-centered he had been! How narrow-minded and unloving to so many whom God had called him to be a neighbor!

Jesus turned the expert’s self-centered question into a question about true, godly love, **“Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”** The expert could only respond, **“The one who had mercy on him.”** Jesus told him, **“Go and do likewise.** Go and be a ‘neighbor’ to all those around you, even those who seem ‘unlovable.’ Go and demonstrate the Messiah’s unexpected love for you.”

Most of us have heard that story before. It’s very well-known, but how often don’t you find yourself thinking or acting like that expert in the Law? How often don’t you and I expect God’s love to be so much narrower, so much more exclusive to us and not others?

Isn’t it so much easier to view your “neighbor” through a very narrow lens? Isn’t it so much easier to show love to those you know or who are like you in background or social status or race or culture? How often don’t you and I find ourselves so focused inwardly that we avoid those people who just don’t bring out the “love” in us? The co-worker who loves to flaunt their political opinions about everything often criticizing Christians like you. The family member who irritates you or the classmate who makes your life miserable. The people moving next door who are very different from you.

To our shame, it’s far too easy to keep the love of Christ only for yourself and those like you, to refuse to be kind and generous and patient with people not like you. How foolish we are and how ridiculous such narrow-mindedness seems when we remember how “unlovable” we all are! Sometimes like the expert in the Law you and I think we’re doing pretty well in God’s eyes, when in reality we fall far short of the perfect love he demands. Then Jesus’ tough, unexpected love reminds us all too clearly that we’ve loved ourselves more highly than him, let alone our “unlovable” neighbors.

In spite of knowing that, Jesus still loved us with a perfect, unexpected love. When Jesus lived a perfect life, he showed mercy and compassion to everyone—every outcast, every sinner, every Jew, every Gentile, every person whom others considered a second-class creation of God. He saw every person as a soul for whom he came to live, die, and rise again.

Jesus saw each of us and our need for his unexpected love—love that brought him here, love that moved him to give up everything, not just time and security and money like the Samaritan, but life itself. None of us deserved it, but Christ’s merciful love moved him to act. His love for the “unlovable” displayed itself in his

perfect life, innocent death, and glorious resurrection—to make us “lovable” before God. He even forgives us for those times when we’ve been unloving to those who need his love.

So how do you respond to such shocking, unexpected love? Well, Christ’s unexpected love changes your heart and leads you to be compassionate as God wants. Christ’s unexpected love changes your attitude to be like his and transforms you into a “neighbor” who actually loves the “unlovable.” Christ’s unexpected love compels us to be like the Samaritan willing to sacrifice time and security and money for the sake of those who need his love. Christ’s unexpected love compels us to be like the Samaritan so Christ’s love flows through us to every “neighbor” that Jesus places in our path to serve—no matter who they are. How do we respond to Christ’s unexpected love? We respond with love. May our gracious Lord enable us to show that love to whomever the Lord puts in our path to serve. Amen.