

The Gruff Motorcyclist

When Lauren was an environmental consultant, she spent a summer working with this gruff, kind of scary-looking construction worker who came to the site each day on his rather large motorcycle. Now, this was the kind of dude that you might find intimidating – even anxiety provoking – if you ran into him in a parking lot or on a street at night. You can imagine that, right? You sort of have a picture of that kind of guy in your head?

Well, one day the gruff motorcyclist came to the site looking pretty beat up. And he was driving a car. No motorcycle in sight. He and Lauren got to talking (as they often did), and she asked what had happened to him.

The night before, on his way home from work, the gruff motorcyclist was stopped at a red light when a car rear-ended him with some force. His bike – which was totaled – wound up falling on top of him. Now, I'm not a motorcycle expert. By any stretch of the imagination. The closest I've come to being on one was riding a moped in India. But even *I* know that it's *bad* when your bike falls on you. Even *I* know that they're incredibly heavy and sometimes difficult (if not impossible) to lift by yourself (especially if you're underneath it).

That was the case for the gruff motorcyclist. He was pinned beneath his bike, and he couldn't get up. The person who hit him drove off without so much as getting out of their car, and he told Lauren that no one else stopped either. All of these people on their way home from work driving past him, rubber-necking, stopping at the light, and not one of them stopped to help him until the tow truck that he'd managed to call arrived.

I imagine those people driving by. There's the high-powered businessman who's finally on his way home after a twelve-hour day that started at 6 AM. He sees the gruff motorcyclist and thinks, *I do not have time for this. I just want to get home and get dinner.* And so he drives off. There's the mom who's just picked up her ten-year-old son from camp. She sees the gruff motorcyclist and thinks, *He looks pretty rough, and it's going to be such a hassle to pull over and then get back into traffic later. What if it takes a long time for the police to come once I call them?* And so she drives off. There's the couple coming back from a few days away. They see the gruff motorcyclist and think, *We could get stuck here for hours if we stop to help. We'd rather have some quiet time at home before we go back to work tomorrow.* And so they drive off. Everyone sees the man pinned beneath his bike and – for one reason or another – decides to drive away without doing anything.

And you might be thinking, *Well, at least I understand the mom! After all, it could be dangerous to help a strange man like that.* The gruff motorcyclist actually thought of that too – he said to Lauren, “I guess some people might not want to stop because they might find me scary.”

But Lauren raised a good point. She said, “I wouldn't be scared to stop. You were pinned beneath a motorcycle. And I wouldn't have been able to get it off of you! Besides, it was rush hour; there were tons of people around. In any event, I could have called 911. I could even have stayed in my car to call, if I were really worried it was some kind of trick.” True. But how many of us really *want* to stop in the middle of traffic after a busy day to help out some stranger on the side of the road, especially when you have no idea how long it might take for help to arrive?

When Lauren told me this story three years ago, I remember thinking to myself, *this is the perfect modern equivalent of the Good Samaritan. I've got to remember this one.* So imagine my delight when I saw that the lectionary text for this week was Luke 10! And it *is* a perfect, modern illustration. A man is on his way, and he falls...literally. Because of a hit and

run. By chance, all of these people pass by the place where he lies injured. But they don't stop. They just continue on their way.

And here's why I really like this story: it's easy to get inside the heads of the people driving by. It's easy to imagine what they're thinking because it's not a completely foreign scenario. And what we might be thinking is not so different from what the Priest and the Levite might have been thinking in the parable. We're busy; we're on our way *to* something, so we don't want or have time to stop. The situation seems dangerous (in the parable, it's entirely possible that the robbers could still have been around). If we do stop, it could take hours to adequately help the victim in question. Or, to put it simply, helping this neighbor requires the sacrifice of stepping outside of what's comfortable.

That's really what Jesus invites us to do in this passage from Luke this morning. Jesus invites us to face the reality that acting with mercy often requires risk and discomfort. It often requires some kind of sacrifice – like that of our time or our schedule or our convenience. Acting with mercy often interrupts our carefully planned lives, giving up what we desire in the moment in order to offer compassion and healing to another. Jesus invites us to pull out of traffic, delay dinner, get to bed a little bit later, or miss out on a bit of downtime so that we might help the gruff motorcyclist lying stuck under his bike in the middle of the road – even if that just means calling 911 from the safety of our car and waiting for an ambulance to arrive. Jesus invites us to love our neighbor as we love ourselves, fully knowing that such love is often risky, uncomfortable, and an interruption.

But Jesus also takes it one step further – which really does matter. Jesus is very clear to say that the first two people who pass the victim are the most religious folks of the day: a priest and a Levite. And many commentators have pointed out that for these two men, part of the reason that they crossed to the other side of the road was likely because they were worried about becoming unclean. See, they might have thought that the victim was dead. And touching a dead body made you ritually unclean. It affected your ability to worship in the temple and be a part of social and religious circles for a proscribed period of time. So they wouldn't want to risk touching the man – even to see if he were alive – because it might get in the way of their worship of God. It might pollute them, even make them feel less righteous. They *needed* to follow this religious rule.

So Jesus tells us that showing mercy might mean sacrificing religious doctrine or dogma, sacrificing rigid rules or theologies, in order to truly love our neighbor as we love ourselves. It might even mean asking some hard questions *about* our theology or the way we do worship or even the language that we use.

This past Wednesday night, our inclusive Bible study wrestled with the question: can the Church sin? How does redemption come to a Church that is broken? We talked about denominations like Catholicism and Mormonism that hold theologies that are oppressive to women and queer folks. We talked about how denominations – including ours – have supported slavery using scripture. We talked about the inquisition and the crusades. And then a couple of people said, “But it's not just other denominations, and it's not just historic. The Church – even our church – is still broken.”

It's true. And it would be so easy to read this passage from Luke and think, “Well, this clearly applies to *other* Christians – this clearly means, for example, that that super-conservative Christian who won't even attend a gay family member's wedding needs to let go of the comfort of their rigid doctrine in order to truly love their queer neighbor as themselves.” That's actually what I did for part of the week. But Christ confronts *us* through this text. Christ asks *us* to look

at ourselves and wonder, “What might we need to let go of – how might we need to interrupt what’s comfortable for a moment – in order to better love our neighbor as ourselves?” Christ asks us to wonder, “How does the way that we do things as progressive Christians still support racism or sexism or classism or ableism or any -ism or -phobia, and what might we do about it?” Christ asks us to look within.

This parable is one of those ones that most of us know pretty well. It’s one of those ones that we can read without really thinking about it and that we regard as being pretty safe, pretty ‘aww that’s nice.’ But when you really dig in, it’s kind of jarring. Through it, Jesus invites us to interrupt our lives and step out of what’s comfortable to love the gruff motorcyclist pinned under his bike. Through it, Jesus invites us to interrupt our worship and step outside of what feels righteous to show mercy to our neighbors. Through it, Jesus invites us to examine ourselves and even sacrifice something of ourselves to extend the healing love of God to others. May we have the courage to accept Christ’s invitation.