

When Lisanne and I were in our early 30s, we bought a small Cape Cod house just off Route 1 in South Brunswick, NJ, with the help of her parents. Up until then, we had only lived in dorms and apartments, so purchasing a standalone home was a significant milestone. That Cape Cod was the place where Maya took her first steps. It was the house where we celebrated Jack and Merle, Lisanne’s parents, on their joint 60th birthdays, only to lose them to separate illnesses a few years later. It was our first home as a family.

I vividly recall waking up in that house for the very first time. We were startled awake by a loud, jarring noise. I don’t know what went through Lisanne’s mind, but when I heard that noise, I was convinced someone had thrown something at the house. This was the late 1990s, and being open about our relationship was not always safe. I leapt out of bed, expecting to see egg running down our front door. Instead, what I saw was something unfamiliar to apartment dwellers — a garbage truck, making its usual racket as it collected the neighbor’s trash. My reaction revealed my own deeply ingrained fears and preconceived notions of who our neighbors might be.

I share this memory of our first home, and my unconscious reaction to perceived danger, because I believe it connects to a deeper lesson embedded in this parable from the Gospel of Luke. And that lesson is this: Fear, when left unchecked, can distort our perceptions, impair our decision-making, and prevent us from offering the mercy that Jesus calls us to embody.

The parable begins with a self-assured scholar who attempts to trap Jesus into saying something heretical. He has a goal, and it's not just to challenge Jesus but to elevate himself. It is a typical move of an insecure person; that need to make another look insignificant. And when it doesn't happen; when he can't get Jesus to react the way he wants, he tries to control the situation by asking yet another question he thinks will trip him up. He asks well then, “Who is my neighbor?”.

To understand the impact Jesus' parable would have had on the scholar we need to be aware that divisions between Jews and Samaritans were

deeply entrenched, despite their shared ancestry. As Jim Wallis writes in *The False White Gospel*, “The Jews considered Samaritans foreigners and enemies; unclean and dangerous. They were thought to be bad people and were treated that way...Jews stayed away from them, isolated them, and definitely avoided venturing into their communities.” So, when the scholar asks his last question, as theologian Amy-Jill Levine once noted, Jesus essentially responds by saying, your neighbor is “The very worst person you can imagine—your enemy”.

We often focus on the Samaritan’s actions—his willingness to stop, his mercy, his generosity, or we judge the religious leaders who ignored the man in need. We rarely consider the experience of the man in the ditch. Imagine his fear each time he heard footsteps, only to have his hope crushed as his fellow Jews passed him by. And then, imagine his confusion, and perhaps even greater fear, when the one who finally stopped to help was a Samaritan, a man he had been conditioned to distrust. We don’t really know why the religious leaders refused to help, but fear may have played a role. And I’m guessing the Samaritan who did stop

was afraid as well. If any Jews had come upon the scene, his actions could have put him in danger.

Given all of these particulars, the lesson of this parable seems clear: we are called to show mercy to those we struggle to be with—even those we despise. Jesus teaches the scholar, and indirectly all of us, that mercy and kindness are not reserved for those who look, think, or believe as we do. Sometimes, we must extend love to the very people who trigger our deepest fears, even if that love can only be offered from a distance. We are called us to move beyond the walls of division built on fear and prejudice.

I enrolled in an online seminar on Conflict Resolution through the University of Southern Maine this month. At the start of our first class, the instructor announced a title change: the course will now be called “Embracing Conflict.” That shift initially unsettled me. That’s not what I signed up for, but as he explained, I saw the wisdom in the new name. Changing ingrained patterns requires us to face conflict head-on which means we have to embrace it as an opportunity for transformation.

In a time when division threatens to pull us apart, we are called to build bridges instead of walls. It is not enough to reject division; we have to actively practice mercy and kindness. Finding common ground is difficult, especially when fear threatens to paralyze us, but it is necessary.

Poet Naomi Shihab Nye captures this truth in her poem *Kindness*. I tried to simply pull out lines from her poem to share with you but it didn't do justice to her powerful words, so I'm going to read the whole thing.

Before you know what kindness really is
you must lose things,
feel the future dissolve in a moment
like salt in a weakened broth.
What you held in your hand,
what you counted and carefully saved,
all this must go so you know
how desolate the landscape can be
between the regions of kindness.
How you ride and ride

thinking the bus will never stop,
the passengers eating maize and chicken
will stare out the window forever.

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness
you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho
lies dead by the side of the road.

You must see how this could be you,
how he too was someone
who journeyed through the night with plans
and the simple breath that kept him alive.

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.

You must wake up with sorrow.

You must speak to it till your voice
catches the thread of all sorrows
and you see the size of the cloth.

Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,
only kindness that ties your shoes

and sends you out into the day to gaze at bread,
only kindness that raises its head
from the crowd of the world to say
It is I you have been looking for,
and then goes with you everywhere
like a shadow or a friend.

Nye’s poem reminds us that before we truly understand kindness and mercy, we must know loss, sorrow, and the depth of human vulnerability. The man in the ditch knew sorrow. The Samaritan, shaped by his own experiences of exclusion, knew sorrow. And yet, it was kindness that moved him to act.

When we step beyond fear and embrace mercy even in the midst of conflict, we become part of God’s healing work. Mercy is not passive; it is a force that compels us to act; to transform and be transformed. And so, Jesus tells us plainly: “Go and behave like that Samaritan.” Show mercy not just to those who are easy to love, but to those who are hard to love. Be

not afraid, for God is with us and in God’s realm of love, there is no
“other”—we are all one. Amen.