

July 14, Ordinary 15C (Luke 10:25-37)

## Can we behave ourselves into love?

by [Kristin Berkey-Abbott](#) in the [July 3, 2019](#) issue

In the Gospel reading for this week, Luke gives us one of the stories that even non-Christians are likely to have heard before: the parable of the good Samaritan. Those of us who go to church have likely heard it regularly, and this repetition should tell us how important it is to love our neighbor. But hearing the story regularly also makes it easy to lose sight of this message.

Many readers focus on the first two who pass by, avoiding the bleeding stranger in the road. The priest and the Levite have high status in their culture, and we might expect better behavior from them. Their religious vocations might lead some people to outrage over hypocrisy. But this is not Jesus' focus.

We could focus on the victim, traveling alone on the road to Jericho. But this story is not a cautionary tale of how to avoid trouble from bandits and thieves. In the details of how the Samaritan cares for the victim, binding his wounds with oil and wine, we might see foreshadowing of the crucifixion of Jesus. But although Jesus may be telling us something about his death, he also has a broader lesson about life.

That lesson is about the Samaritan and what he does. Those who heard Jesus tell this story would have been expecting bad behavior from this character, because Samaritans were seen as enemies of the Jews. Instead, he turns out to be the hero of the story—the one who provides an example of how we are to live our lives.

In this surprise twist, with this unusual hero, Jesus tries to stop the standard responses of listeners and to shock them into a new realization. He could have just said plainly, "The greatest commandments are these: love God, and love your neighbor as yourself." His listeners might well have responded, *Great. I'm on target. Love God—check. Love other people—yes, most of the time.* But with its surprise twist of exemplary behavior from the least likely place, the story of the good Samaritan shows what the Great Commandments mean. And here we see the size of the task that God gives us.

Love is action, not emotion. We show our love by what we do for those who need us. It's not enough to see our fellow humans and think about how much we love them. Frankly, many of us can't even do that. If we monitor our thoughts and feelings, we might ask, "Am I really feeling love? Or just benign neglect?" We might be startled to realize during the course of a day how often we feel more rage at our fellow humans than love. Or maybe we're feeling a different emotion. Many of us go through our lives wracked by depression and pain and trying desperately not to feel anything, using any number of harmful ways to numb ourselves.

There's a way out of this pit. We have to go through life behaving as if we love each other. We can behave ourselves into love.

This training of love for the world can start small. We might not start out by stopping for every stranger in need that we see or giving away all of our money and possessions or moving to the streets in solidarity with the homeless. We can start where we are. We can help out even when we don't have to. We can stop keeping track of who has done what to wrong us or who is taking advantage of the system. Instead of keeping track of our losses, we can keep track of gratitude. We can share with people who haven't had the lucky breaks that we have had.

It's not enough, however, to love the people who are easy to love. It's much harder to love those who have behaved in horrible ways. But we must love them too. In fact, it might be the more important task.

It's easy to see the Samaritan as a Christ figure: the outsider who stops to help, who takes charge of the victimized who have been left to bleed to death by the side of the road, who finds care for the victim and pays for it. But we too are called to be good Samaritans to the world. If we start looking for opportunities to bind the world's wounds, we'll find that the world has no shortage. We show our love for God by loving each other, and the ways we show love for each other are as varied as humanity itself. There is no limit to the opportunities we have to fulfill this commandment.