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Proper 10C
Peace, Seattle
July 11, 2010 epk
Luke 10:25-37

RISKING LOVE

There are only a handful of characters:
- the lone traveler, assaulted and left half-dead;
- the religious leaders who pass by him on the other side;
- the Samaritan who goes an extra mile in showing compassion to the man
- the innkeeper who provides the space and care for his recovery

Social ministries like Lutheran Community Services trace their DNA back to this parable; and hospitals from Puyallup to Boston, Long Island to L.A. bear its name.

Of all the stories Jesus told, it's probably the most well known, and the point seems crystal clear: Even your enemy is your neighbor, and this is what loving him looks like.

But we like to make things complicated. Entrenched problems split black and white ethical questions into finer and finer shades of gray. And we find ourselves needing to ask the same fundamental questions over and over again.

Standing alongside the lawyer in Luke's story we, too, address Jesus with the questions:
WHO, REALLY, IS MY NEIGHBOR? HOW FAR, REALLY, SHOULD MY COMPASSION GO?
- Does it include the woman at the off ramp with a cardboard sign?
- Or the outspoken man next door whose politics are 180 from mine?
- Does it include the relative, coworker or ex-spouse who pushes my buttons in all the wrong ways?
- The paroled sex offender? The Russian spy? The Islamic fundamentalist?
- Where do I draw the line?

Like the lawyer who came to Jesus, we, too, seek the clarity of knowing who we are required to love so we can be clear about who we are not required to love.

But Jesus responds with a story that challenges our limits and dismantles our categories; a story that calls us to see compassion not as one check off box on the daily task list but an invitation to radical, risk taking love—even toward those who are to us – the enemy.

I pressure washed our back porch steps last week, taking off several years worth of accumulated moss growth in the process. It looks extraordinarily clean now—for the moment—but stripping off the soft moss that had grown on the front edges and sides of those stairs exposed all the rough edges, gaps, and fissures in the concrete.

Jesus' parable this morning, like that pressure washer, strips away the soft edges, equivocations, and compromises of our lives, exposing gaps in our loving as obvious as the ones on those concrete stairs.

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In order to really get what Jesus is doing, says Amy-Jill Levine,

> "We should think of ourselves as the person in the ditch, and then ask, 'Is there anyone, from any group, about whom we'd rather die than acknowledge, "she offered help" or "he showed compassion"?' Is there any group whose members might rather die than help us? If so, then we know how to find the modern equivalent for the Samaritan"[1]

One such "modern equivalent" can be found in the remarkable story of Larry Trapp and Michael and Julie Weisser.[2]

Larry Trapp was once the grand dragon of the Ku Klux Klan in the state of Nebraska. The walls of Larry's apartment in Lincoln were plastered with his heroes: pictures of Adolf Hitler.

Larry was also confined to a wheelchair. He had lost both his legs to diabetes in 1988.

Michael and Julie Weisser are Jewish. Michael was the cantor of a Jewish congregation in Lincoln, Nebraska. When the Weissers moved to town, Larry Trapp found out their phone number and began leaving messages on their answering machine, messages like:

YOU'LL BE SORRY YOU AND YOUR FAMILY EVERY MOVED HER, JEW BOY.

Larry sent the Weissers bundles of hate mail with notes at the top:

WE DON'T WANT YOU IN OUR TOWN, SCUM.

The Weissers had experienced anti-Semitism in other places, but they'd hoped it would not happen in Lincoln, where they wished to live to raise their teenagers through high school. But with the constant barrage of hate mail and phone threats, Michael & Julie realized they had come to HATE Larry Trapp.

Michael said:

IT IS THE HIGHEST PRINCIPLE OF OUR FAITH TO MAKE ENEMIES FRIENDS,
BUT IT'S A PRINCIPLE THAT'S RARELY PRACTICED.
SO I MADE A DECISION TO PRACTICE KINDNESS TOWARD LARRY.

Michael began by calling Larry's number and leaving messages like:

YOU WILL HAVE TO ANSWER BEFORE GOD FOR YOUR HATRED.
and BECAUSE OF YOUR DISABILITIES, LARRY, YOU KNOW THE NAZIS WOULD HAVE DESTROYED YOU FIRST.

One time as Larry called the Weissers to leave a message telling Michael not to leave him messages any more, Michael Weisser picked up the phone and said "with kindness in his voice,"

LARRY, I KNOW YOU'RE DISABLED—CAN WE DRIVE YOU TO THE GROCERY STORE?

There was a long silence…….then came the reply:

NO. BUT THANKS FOR ASKING.

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[1] Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 148-149. Quoted by Matthew Skinner in *Feasting on the Word, Year C Volume 3*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010) 243.

[2] At least one book as well as a number of articles and at least one radio program have featured the story of the relationship between former Klansman Larry Trapp and the Weisser family. This retelling of the story is based on a report by Maria Hinojosa which aired on National Public Radio on Wednesday, July 29, 1992. For more on this remarkable story see Kathryn Waterson's book, *Not By The Sword: How the Love of a Cantor and His Family Transformed a Klansman*, (Simon & Shuster: New York, 1995), or go to: http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,974903,00.html; or to: http://www.nydailynews.com/ny_local/bronx/2009/01/22/2009-01-22_faith_fellowship__diplomacy_flushing_tem.html - ixzz0tCmkekFZ.

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With that brief conversation, the tide began to turn.
Eventually Larry Trapp called Michael and Julie Weisser and invited them over for dinner.

Michael called his friends: YOU WON'T BELIEVE WHERE WE'RE GOING FOR DINNER.

Some thought it was a bad idea.
Michael told them, "IF I DON'T CALL YOU BACK BY MIDNIGHT, SEND THE POLICE OVER."

But the police were not necessary. In the room of the apartment filled with posters of Hitler, Julie and Michael Weisser and Larry Trapp talked for four hours. Thus their friendship began.

Larry's diabetes worsened. But transformed by his new friendship with the Weissers, he decided to devote his final months to telling others how empty lives of hate really are.

> I WON'T JUST GIVE THEM ABSTRACT REASONS, Larry says, I'LL COMPARE HOW I WAS THEN, WITH HOW I AM NOW. AND THERE'S NO COMPARISON. I'M HAPPY NOW.

Larry spent the last nine months of his life living in the Weisser home, tended to by Julie Weisser who left her job to care for him full time.

"Which one of these do you think was a neighbor to the man?" asked Jesus.

"The one who showed mercy," he replied.

Jesus said to him. "GO AND DO LIKEWISE."

AMEN