

Matthew 5:44-48

“You’re familiar with the old written law, ‘Love your friend’ and its unwritten companion, ‘Hate your enemy.’ I’m challenging that. I’m telling you to love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer, for then you are working out of your true selves, your God-created selves. This is what God does. God gives God’s best---the sun to warm and the rain to nourish—to everyone, regardless: the good and bad, the nice and nasty. If all you do is love the lovable, do you expect a bonus? Anybody can do that. If you simply say hello to those who greet you, do you expect a medal? Any run-of-the-mill sinner does that. ‘In a word, what I’m saying is, Grow Up. You’re kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you.

Luke 10:25-37

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus, “Teacher,” he said, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” He answered, “You shall 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 your neighbor as yourself.” And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.” But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling, came near him; and when he came to the place and saw him; he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, “Take care of him, and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.” Which of these three, do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

‘Restoring Faithfulness’

Great spiritual traditions are used as a means to open us,
to bring us face to face with our life
and to help us see in a new way
by developing a stillness of mind
and a strength of heart.

Jack Kornfeld

She did what we all do at one time or another. She left her wallet, with her driver’s license, credit cards, and essential cash in it, in the cart at Walmart. Had she noticed it right away, instead of the next morning, she would have hurried back into the store with her nine and seven year olds to retrieve her valuables and relieve her fears. Had she noticed it right away she would not have had to fight off the cascade of negative emotions that almost kept her from going back to Walmart, against all odds, to see if her wallet was there. So when the lost and found clerk said: ‘Someone turned this in last night,’ tears of gratitude welled up from within, her sad turned to glad, her anger and panic disappeared, and her faith in humanity got a boost. .But then, because she was a teacher of the ‘Go and do likewise kind,’ she immediately turned to her children and said: “See how happy you can make someone feel when you do the right thing (helping out and returning the wallet) instead of the wrong thing (not helping out and keeping the wallet for yourself)!” .

In our Bible lesson for today, when the ‘doing the right thing ’ Jewish Lawyer asked the faith question: “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus replied in typical rabbinical fashion with a question. “What is written in the law?” The man answered, ‘You shall 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 your neighbor as yourself’. Then, rejoicing in the man’s desire to tether himself to the heart of God and his

neighbor with Love, Jesus responded with God's truth: "You have given the right answer, do this and you will live." What a beautiful ending to scene one in a faithful Jew's spiritual journey of being obedient to the 600 plus Divine Laws of Moses.

"Who is my neighbor?" the self justifying man asked Jesus next. Here, all the 'doing the right thing' lawyer wanted to know was who he should and shouldn't be neighborly with in order to stay clean, pure in heart, and sinless in God's eyes. It's the same question that good people of faith ask today. He asked, and Jesus, the teacher of Eternal Life in God's realm of Love, answered with the 'Good Samaritan' parable. Having already heard the parable in its entirety, I'd like to sum it up in this way:

Once upon a time in the land of violence where enemies meet face to face, where the spirit of fear, anger, prejudice, and hate overtakes goodness in the human heart . . . the Holy Spirit fell upon a Samaritan and a dying Jew: to disarm gut wrenching fear with faith's knowledge of being beloved children of God; to strengthen their spirit of compassionate care with faith's knowledge of being endowed with the merciful heart of God; and to help them trust in Jesus' way of non-violent Love.

Naturally, the freaked out crowd's first reaction to Jesus' fear evoking, "Fren-A-Me" sounding parable, was: 'Not me, not now, not ever.' Seeing that this was so, Jesus challenged the lawyer with another question: "Which encounter showed the transforming power of merciful love?" When the lawyer answered the one between feared and hated enemies (the Samaritan and Jew), the eyes of the lawyer's heart were opened, and faith graced him with the assurance that he knew this from his true, God created, self. "Go and do likewise," he heard Jesus say next. After which, I think, Jesus heard the man say under his breath. "Does he really think I can do this impossible thing too?"

In a recent UCC Daily Devotional Rev. Samuel wrote: In establishing what is known as the Crown Forum at Morehouse College, Dr. Howard Thurman declared: 'Over the heads of her students, Morehouse holds a crown that she challenges them to grow tall enough to wear.' God has placed a crown, a calling over each of our heads that is even more encompassing than that of Morehouse fame. God has declared that we are made in the image of God, endowed with God's presence and empowered to live by God's authority. But growing tall enough to actually become the persons we are declared to be is the great challenge. The Crown of Life always entails the responsibility to protect and defend the lives of others---especially the weak and the marginalized. When the faithful in Israel failed to uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed they abdicated their divine destiny, reneged on their divine responsibility and (failed to turn enemies into neighbors by showing mercy). Unrealized potential is the ongoing lament of life. To die needing something that was within your grasp. To live under the weight of a problem that you could have developed the courage and the capacity to solve. To go through life without ever realizing who you were created to be. Marianne Williamson once said: "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us."

BE BOLD AND BRAVE was the theme for the 217th Annual Meeting of the Massachusetts Conference of the UCC this year. It was a wonderful time of worship and telling stories about the ways in which individuals and churches are working through their fears of shining with God's Light: A blind musician leading us in prayer and song; a congregation that provides sanctuary for persecuted gay men from foreign lands; pastoral care for PTS Vietnam veterans; Black Lives Matter stance; fossil fuel fund divestment; prison reform work . . . So much to celebrate!