

I think I've told y'all about Mercy Church, that ministry with the homeless folks in Little Rock? They met in the undercroft of that church, which is a fancy way to say they were down in the basement. Now, before you get upset that they were shoved away where no one could see 'em, they picked the spot. We offered the run of the entire complex of buildings and they picked that room. For one thing, it was devoid of all the trappings of intimidating worship spaces. No fifty foot ceilings, no towering stained glass, no uncomfortable pews. They liked being down where the crawlspace blended in with the spooky bathroom. They liked sharing space with AA. They liked having a room they could make their own. It didn't hurt that the outside entrance was a step-down door right at the sidewalk facing the central bus terminal.

It was a funny thing to minister alongside those folks. The board of that start-up church was one of the most eclectic groups I've ever been in. It was me, a religion professor, a Presbyterian minister and her newborn baby, a wealthy woman who always wore furs even in August, a former Soviet bloc social worker, a woman who just moved into her first apartment, and a man who lived in a train engine. We sang songs and said some prayers, offered a place of silence, a place to come down off a high or sleep off a bender. We brought out cots for the colder nights, and we started reading scripture together. And I gotta tell ya, those days reading Bible stories with those folks were incredible and challenging and sometimes a little weird. The religion professor led the conversations but didn't try to teach scripture. He tried to draw out what these scriptures meant for the gathered congregation. And let me tell you, I've never had my scripture reading worldview challenged so consistently than down in that bus-stop facing basement.

You know, most of my life reading the Bible has come from a place of relative comfort. I mean, sometimes I'm in a hurry, and sometimes I get a crick in my neck, but I'm reading from my home or my office, maybe I'll read at a restaurant or in a waiting room, but mostly I'm getting to choose from a whole slew of places with nice chairs. Most of the folks gathered in the undercroft hadn't heard these stories like that. Most of them heard 'em through the lens of one preacher or another, some of 'em carried a worn Bible as a talisman of protection, but most of 'em heard these stories through the game of telephone that came from a friend who heard it from a friend who'd heard it from another friend. And all of them lived a very different existence from my own. Nevermind *how* we read these stories. Think about *where* we do. Or what just happened ten minutes before we sat down to read. The insights these folks brought from a life lived so very distantly from my own were fascinating, sure, but to maintain that distance of fascination reduced witnessing their insights into a kind of safari.

So, one day after Mercy Church, I took the guy that lived in the train - his name's Ken - to a pizza place around the corner. He picked the spot because this little pizza joint used to be a hot stop on the punk scene. Blondie and The Clash and Green Day had played there, and the air still had the feel of a place the establishment ought to avoid. We sat over greasy slices and wiped our fingers on see-through napkins while Ken started talking and I started shutting up. Ken told his story, that he went from being a husband and a dad to neither in the blink of an eye on the interstate. He talked about how hard he fought to stay sane, to stay whole, to stay in the rat race, but nothing seemed to make sense. He didn't want every day to be a fight, so he stepped back, little by little, until he'd crafted a life he loved. From the locomotive, he felt safe. He had a roof over his head and a place to come in from the cold. He had a door, if he wanted to use it, but he rarely wanted to use it. He could watch storms blow through. He read through nearly the entire downtown library's collection and started working through satellite locations, too. Ken even had an unofficial deal with the rail workers. They knew he was there, but they didn't bother him so long as he'd keep an eye out. He had a similar deal with the

paramedics. He called them so much for people he'd find around downtown that they knew him by his voice. Ken is a good dude, and he's not down on his luck. He chose this life. And he doesn't want your pity or mine. What he wants is to help other folks and to live a peaceful life. And what he really wants is for people to stop looking at him like he's wrong just by existing. Talking about his experiences on the street, he had a lot to say about Jesus and the Christians he'd seen. The line that made me choke on a slice of pepperoni: "They sure find a lot of reasons to hate folks they think God wants them to hate. But they never seem to come around to loving the ones God tells them to love."

Now, the Samaritans weren't all that different from what Ken's getting at. They were a different group of people, but they weren't all that different. They shared the same ancestors as the Jews of Jesus' day, and they had a real hard history. When the Assyrian Empire destroyed the Northern Kingdom of Israel 700 years before Jesus came along, the survivors were deported and spread across the conquering empire. Most of them. The tiny remnant that remained, they're who the Samaritans came out of. But when people began to return home from the exile, generations later, there were some differences in how they practiced their once shared faith. The ones who had stayed back said they were the true faith because they'd remained unchanged. The ones who had been sent into exile said they were the true faith because they'd gone through a difficult trial and adapted. That's the basic origin of the split. It's more complicated than that, but not by much. The exiled folks that returned ended up growing into the dominant group, and the Samaritans (the ones left behind) lost out. And the schism grew and the chasm deepened, and by the time Jesus came around, no one wanted to cross the line and see the others because that was a reliably unpleasant experience.

You know, it's kinda interesting that Jesus even goes to this place. It's an important site, Jacob's Well had all sorts of meaning for early Hebrews. It's a place of salvation in the wilderness, so that makes sense. But it's deep in Samaria. You don't go there by accident. And wherever else you're trying to get to, you can get to by going around *those people*. But that's where he chooses to go. No one would do this by accident. It's just not done. So Jesus is up to something. Plenty of ink's been spilled on what follows, from the powerful witness of a woman to Jesus' mind-reading performance and even to the power of a simple phrase like "come and see." But what I'm interested in is that Jesus was even there in the first place. The whole world said he was supposed to hate the Samaritans, and the root of that was supposed to be in some truth about God. But God didn't separate out the Samaritans like chaff, it just happened. And in spite of the hate people said God wanted them to carry, Jesus goes to them and offers the first person he sees eternal life. And that offer is an offer of love. We know it's love because just last week we heard that God sent him because of love. All that he does is a message of love meant to show the world who, exactly, it is that God loves. As it turns out, that's everybody. God doesn't love the division or the hate. God loves the people. Regardless of who they are, what they were born into, or what they've chosen. In spite of all that we are, God loves us and crosses all sorts of lines to show us that love.

Thinking back to Ken and our pizza slices before I went home to my 2,000-square foot house and he to his 200-ton locomotive, I can't help but hear his line echoing in my head. "They sure find a lot of reasons to hate folks they think God wants them to hate. But they never seem to come around to loving the ones God tells them to love." Assuming Ken's right, who does God tell us to love? The Gospels say it's "love your neighbor." And if we follow Luke's totally reasonable follow-up question, "Who is my neighbor?" we end up right back where we started. Jesus doesn't answer that directly. Instead, he tells a story, the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Who is my neighbor? Is it the good people of God who cross the street when they see something unusual in their path, when they see a body in a ditch or Ken's tall frame standing proud? Or is it the one person who stops, the last person we "should" give the time of day? The hateful, the loving, the easy to love and, especially, the hard to love? Whoever it is that we're told we're "supposed" to hate, that's it. Who is my neighbor? Leave it to Ken, he says it's all of 'em.