A Story about Compassion

From the Parable of the Good Samaritan, Luke 10. I know many of you know this story already, but I think it’s worth another read:

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

He replied, “What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?”

He answered, “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, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

“You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.”

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead.

A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side.

So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him.

He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him.

The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’

“Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”

The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.”

Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”

The apparent moral of this story seems to be that everyone can potentially be our neighbor, and that at any time we are obligated to deliver mercy and justice to just about anyone we pass by. This is an extremely high bar to set, and (as one person in the audience pointed out) a bar that could be ruinous financially if we followed it literally in the streets of San Francisco.

Whether or not this is the exact moral of the story, and what limits our compassion should take, is up for debate. Around 30 years ago, a group of researchers at Princeton took a completely different angle at this story and drew out an alternative moral. Specifically, they saw this hypothesis: being more religious does not make you more compassionate. That is, the Levites and the priests, the clergy of the time, did not intervene and show compassion to the wounded traveler. Only the social-outcast Samaritan did. Incidentally (since I know you many of you are grad students), I’ll mention that this particular research paper was very influential; if I go to Google Scholar and search for the phrase “helping behavior,” this is the very first hit that comes up, with over 700 citations.

The working hypothesis of the researchers was that thinking about and being primed with more religious and compassionate thoughts doesn’t increase the chance that you’ll help a random stranger, Good-Samaritan style. So the experimenters did this: they took a group of seminary students from Princeton, and had half of them, a control group, prepare a talk on their career and vocation. They were then sent to Point B for a second part of the experiment, to fill out a questionnaire. On the way to Point B, the experimenters planted a third party that lay down, coughing. This sick coughing man
emulated the sick traveler in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. In order to get to Point B, the seminary student would have to detour around the third party or sometimes even literally step over them.

The other half of the students, the treatment group, did the same thing, except that instead of preparing a talk on careers, they prepared a talk on the Parable of the Good Samaritan itself. That is, they were studying a passage that informed them very bluntly: if you see a stranger at the side of the road who is wounded and sick, and you are on your way for you religious duty, you should stop and help the stranger at the side of the road! As they walked to Point B, they had a real life opportunity to apply the message that they had just received (and in fact they were ready to give a talk about the subject and teach to others).

Turns out, the experimenters found no significant difference between the group that studied the Parable of the Good Samaritan and the group that just talked about a random nonreligious topic.

(Source for those interested: http://psycnet.apa.org/journals/psp/27/1/100/)

What I take from this is that compassion is not, at its heart, a knowledge thing. Knowing more about compassion may not make you more compassionate. I think my work is a knowledge thing, so I study and learn and try harder and I believe that one day I’ll find an answer. Church is sometimes designed as if it were a knowledge thing (we go through the motions of the weekly lecture format), but when it comes to helping out the Good Samaritan, it’s not really about knowledge. Consequently, I won’t spend much time analyzing the text.

You might think that compassion is an action thing instead. Maybe we should go out and do. We can be proactive - instead of waiting for the wounded traveler to come to us, we can go find the wounded travelers out in our world. Maybe we can, for example, go to the soup kitchen and serve food to those who need it. (In fact, if you’re interested in doing this and you’re in the area, contact me - I’ve been to a place nearby and can arrange an event). I think going to the soup kitchen is great. I also think that giving money to charity is great, but I don’t think that our story ends there. If compassion were as something as simple as giving one Saturday of every other month away to charity and donating a few percentage points of my income to a good cause, then I could easily write down compassion onto my to-do list and take care of it with my resources. But I don’t think it’s so simple.

The picture of compassion as giving is nonetheless extremely Biblical and in fact was the cornerstone of many of the compassion laws in the Old Testament. Take for example this command in Deut 15:

7 If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites in any of the towns of the land the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them. 8 Rather, be openhanded and freely lend them whatever they need. […] 10 Give generously to them and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. 11 There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land.

The Old Testament is filled with laws like this, and throughout the Bible compassion was often equated with giving to those in need. But I think this picture is somewhat antiquated now. Not that compassion itself is not giving - but I think that today the principles behind compassion will sometimes make us more than merely givers.

It goes like this: in Biblical times, your wealth was measured in food. The Bible indicates that the patriarchs were rich because they had huge flocks. To be rich was to be well fed; to be poor was to be starving. In that period of life, a person’s most immediate need was often material. In times of famine or when the breadwinner of the family was gone (i.e. the widowed or the orphaned), they needed food
(that is, money) in order to survive. So accordingly, the principle of compassion in the Old Testament was wealth redistribution.

What about for us, today? Is our most pressing need food or wealth? Likely not - we have more than we need. Even the poor among us have more than we need in terms of food and clothing. Giving and simplicity and service are still important, but I think that with those material needs met, compassion should turn to the other needs that are present in our society.

To answer the question of what we need most, I thought that it'd be appropriate to find out what makes people happy or unhappy. A few years ago, in the Proceedings of the National Academies of Science, there was a paper published on what exactly is correlated with happiness and unhappiness in our society. By happiness, the authors simply asked people the question: do you feel joy today? Do you feel happiness today? It was a very simple test. The authors tested a number of different variables, including your income level, whether or not you were religious, whether or not you had a family, whether or not you had a headache, and so on. The results are in the table below.

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<tr>
<td>Regression coefficient</td>
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<td>Smoker</td>
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(Source: [http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2944762/](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2944762/))

The most significant factor for predicting your happiness, it turns out, is whether or not you are religious (!). Specifically, the question they asked was whether or not you indicated that religion was an important part of your life. After that, the next important variable was whether or not it was the weekend, and only after that money enter into the picture. And I'll note that the difference between the “high income” and “low income” groups on this study was substantial, the difference being a factor of four. So, on average, a poor person on Saturday is happier than someone making four times as much on Tuesday. Also, as you get old, you become happier. No joke. This is just what the research says.

But now look at what the negative side shows. *The most significant negative factor here is being alone.* By “alone,” the researchers meant that the person in question didn’t talk to a loved one in the past 24 hours. The penalty for being alone is *massive.* Nothing else even comes close. It is pretty much a full order of magnitude more powerful than being married, a full order of magnitude stronger than doubling your income. It is worse than being a smoker, having a health condition, being obese and divorced and caring for your ailing parents all put together. It outweighs all the positive predictors of happiness in this paper thrown into a single person, which apparently is being a well-off and health-insured grandma on Saturday who is going to church the next day.
This is curious to me because I spend most of my life working on the positive end of the spectrum. I work hard in school so that I'll graduate and get a good job which will probably catapult me from the “low income” group of the paper into the “high income” group. I really look forward to getting married and to one day having kids. But I don’t appreciate just how badly these good factors are swamped by aloneness.

Being alone and being lonely are different, of course, and solitude is often a missing component of our lives. But I think this piece of research illustrates the simple point that the primary poverty that we and our peers face today is not a poverty of possessions but a poverty of relationships and a poverty of meaning.

* * * *

When I first came to Stanford, there were times when I felt very alone. I wrote in an email early on to a friend:

... I usually don’t form tight friendships anymore, threads weaved into threads until you get out unbreakable cords with one or two other people [...] Instead I find myself in a tangled haphazard web, circles within circles sometimes but usually circles beside circles -- talking with several different groups at several different times, and holding onto them with the belief that none of them can be the fireplace but all of them can be individual sparks. And with enough warm sparks I’ll eventually get the fire going and make this place home.

My dad had observed in me towards the end of my undergrad that all of my friends were Asian and Christian, and this disappointed me because it seemed so contrary to the Parable of the Good Samaritan, where the Samaritan reached out to someone so unlike himself. So I tried to break out of the mold while in grad school. I went to events with my neighbors that were coordinated by the Graduate Life Office. These events were put on by Community Associates (CAs) and tried to bring neighbors together. I joined a few different clubs, followed up with people I sat next to in class. I went to different churches, joined a small group, went to the fellowship meetings together. But I still felt lost and adrift. I was employing the shotgun approach of trying to be with many different groups, but I really just craved a deep connection with a few special people and I didn’t find it anywhere. And it’s not really that I wanted “a deep connection” as if I had something important to say and needed someone who I trusted to share with it. I just wanted a place to belong.

Aloneness – it’s difficult to describe. It’s weird, because I wasn’t even feeling “lonely” for the most part. I didn’t have a painful knife-in-the-heart sensation of no one caring about me. Instead I just felt … numb, going through the motions of life. I had trouble finding meaning. As a partial cure I took up hobbies, learned piano, learned Chinese, took lots of classes and did well at research. I tried to leverage my competence, take on busyness to make up for what was fundamentally a heart issue. If I could have chosen I would have found someone or some people who really cared about me intimately and who I could care about in return – but it was an elusive dream and it involved forces beyond my control.

The fix, for me, came slowly and it came not by my trying to solve my own problems but by trying to make it better for others. Since I couldn’t find a home and place to belong for myself, I tried to make it instead for other people and give them a home. I started to lead a small group because I thought that
God wanted me to do so. I joined the CA program itself because I wanted to welcome my neighbors and give them a home, too, and to extend it beyond my Christian circle and into people who were my neighbors, just because they were neighbors. When I joined, it’s not that I loved coordinating events or that I am innately extroverted, because I’m not. But I thought it was the right thing to do, I thought it was living in accordance with the command to love your neighbor as yourself, and I remember that the greatest needs I’ve had have always been in my relationships - so how could you live otherwise?

Turns out that I’m the exception and the other Christian CAs did the job because they liked coordinating events or because of the perks (and to be fair, I also joined the CA program so that I could guarantee a spot for my roommate). But I think that as a group, we could do better at being proactive at being welcoming, proactive at listening, proactive at caring about one another. I think that going to the soup kitchen and donating, things like that, are important, but that in this day and age, where our peers already have a source of sustenance, what we sometimes overlook are people to care for us.

Here’s the thing, though: it’s hard to care, really care, if you’re just forcing it. You can’t do it. It’s completely ineffective. If there’s something at stake, like if someone needs a ride to the hospital ASAP, then you just up and do it and you don’t worry about whether or not you feel like you love them. The sacrifice you make and the help you give is your love for them. But that’s the exception. For the most part love occurs in quiet conversations, in hellos and farewells and the words in between. I think conversations are essential for showing love, and I think we should take them seriously.

When I am talking to somebody there are always two conversations going on. The first is on the surface; it is about politics or music or whatever our mouths are saying. The other is beneath the surface, on the level of the heart, and my heart is either communicating that I like the person I am talking to or I don’t. God wants both conversations to be true. That is, we are to speak the truth in love […] The Bible says that if you talk to somebody with your mouth, and your heart does not love them, that you are like a person standing there smashing two cymbals together. You are only annoying everybody around you.

Donald Miller, Blue Like Jazz

I think in obeying the command to love your neighbor as yourself is most visible in this second conversation that we have with our neighbors, friends, strangers and acquaintances.

The other insight I wanted to share with you about how to love other people is that we think about it all wrong. I personally think of it all wrong. The metaphor that we use for love is completely messed up. Earlier, I talked about having a poverty of relationships. We regularly talk about spending time with each other and valuing one another’s company. Underlying all of our relationships is economic metaphor, the idea that we are trading our love or popularity or time with one another.

But the economic picture for love is all wrong. Love doesn’t function like a bank account. I have this idea in my head that I have a fixed pool of love available, and I receive love from God and give love to other people. If I don’t feel energy to love anymore, then I either have to increase the supply from God somehow or decrease the amount I’m giving out. We use this picture because it feels true, but I don’t think it’s right.

The times when I’ve felt most loved are when the times when I don’t bother thinking about the value of the love I’m giving. When I am convinced that my love is free and the people around me think likewise, then I don’t worry so much about running out. I know that if I feel down there will be plenty of people around me who will infect me and recharge me. I think that your capacity to love is not just determined by yourself - it’s also determined by the people around you.
If you’re in a culture where love is expensive, then loving acts feel more costly because they go against the grain of the culture. But they are simultaneously more valuable, but they are working to change that culture.

In the meantime I still believe that God gives us an infinite supply of love. I don’t always feel it, and when I feel like I’m not loving, then I have to reach out to Him and ask Him to speak the conversation of love that I no longer have the strength to speak. I do it because I believe that this kind of love, this kind of love that says that you really matter to me just because you matter to God, is the clearest expression of the command to love your neighbor as yourself. And, in this day and age, I think it’s the essential picture of compassion.