

The Good Samaritan—Hiatt Allen—August 12, 2018

I didn't always want to be a minister, though it was always somewhere in the back of my mind. Until about a year ago, I thought my career would be in politics, debating policies and ideas while working to make our society and world a better place. I lived in Washington, DC, studying politics, working in education policy, and on political campaigns.

But I came to the realization that the politics I wanted to work in was an idealized version of the decorum we are currently experiencing. Politics seems to no longer be about making our society better, but about getting the win, about making sure the other side loses.

At college, my political discussions took place in a liberal echo chamber. I was shocked when my suggestions of compromise were shunned. The divisions were amplified, people were either right or wrong, in or out. In our world today, we forget our shared humanity, we forget our shared goals, we forget to love our neighbors.

For the past few summers, I have been a counselor at our region's church camp. I love getting to discuss what it means to be a Christian with the youth. And it's so amazing to see their responses. This summer we asked fourth and fifth graders what they will speak up for. Many said friends and family, but they also said they would speak up for the hungry, the poor, for immigrants, for minorities, and for equality, justice, and love.

It would serve us well to reacquire the perspective of youth.

Scout, the main character in *To Kill A Mockingbird*, is an eight year old girl. Growing up in a segregated town, she never understands the divisions that she sees. Scout's perspective about neighbors is one we can all use. She says: "There's just one kind of folks. Folks."

The lawyer in today's story could benefit from that outlook on society. In his question for Christ, who is my neighbor, he is not simply asking who he has to love. He is asking who he does not have to love, looking for the divisions, looking for an out when he doesn't want to accept someone who is different.

To answer his question, Jesus tells him a story about three characters—a priest, a Levite, and a Samaritan—who walk by the injured traveler. This style of storytelling is something we still see today: jokes with three characters—a Christian, a Jew, and a Muslim walk into a bar. Jewish New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine explains that for the crowd listening to Jesus, they would expect the Priest and Levite in the parable to be followed by an Israelite. Stories in the old testament start with the structure, referring first to the priests, who were the religious leaders of the temples; then the Levites, a tribe of Israel that held lesser duties at the temple; and then the general population of Israel.

So Jesus sets his audience up with an expectation that an Israelite will walk by and help the traveler. Instead, he turns the story on its head and has a Samaritan walk up and help the man. The Samaritans were despised by Jews. In the chapter before this parable, Samaritans reject Jesus because he is Jewish. In John, the Samaritan woman at the well is shocked when Jesus speaks to her.

Instead of having an Israelite save the traveler, Jesus has the Israelite's enemy save the traveler and be the neighbor. While the Torah commanded Jews to love their neighbor, it did not specify enemy. So the listening audience would have been astounded by this.

Jesus, however, already knew that love for neighbor was love for enemy. At the beginning of the scripture he asks the Samaritan, "What does the law say? What do you read?" The lawyer answers with the greatest commandments—love God and love your neighbor as yourself—but as Amy-Jill Levine explains, the question was not just about what the law is. The question was about the words in the greatest commandment. In ancient Hebrew there are no vowels.

So the word for neighbor in Hebrew looks just like the word enemy.

The notion of love for everyone is not just something that is aspirational, it is something that is textual, physical. Enemy and Neighbor are one in the same, and God expects us to love all of them.

It seems like we forget that all too often today. Just like the lawyer, we care too much about ourselves, about our own lives. We're too quick to pick our side.

There is the expectation in society that when things don't go our way, there's someone to blame. But that's the easy way out.

Just because life's not fair doesn't mean we should look to divide ourselves.

We have to ask why we need to create divisions.

Is it because we're uncomfortable with someone who is different than us? Is it because we don't know them? Is it because we listen to people who play to our fears?

We are faced with a choice every day of our life. Will we make the easy choice, or will we make the right choice?

It's easy to believe the gospel of fear. It can be comforting to believe that we have someone to blame when we face seemingly insurmountable conflicts.

But we don't actually have enemies. We only have those enemies we want to have. And we don't have insurmountable conflicts. We only have those conflicts that we want to believe are unsolvable.

We are called to love our neighbor as ourselves. And answering that call by loving everyone, even those we think are our enemies, is the hard choice.

We face that hard choice every day when we interact with each other. But even more so, we face that hard choice when it comes to societal challenges.

Friends, so many of our problems in society are born out of hate and fear:

Fear of mass shootings has led to students who are scared for their safety at school.

Fear of terrorists has led us to kill innocent men, women, and children every day with bombs.

Fear of race has led to white supremacy that marches in our streets, to unarmed black people shot by the police.

Fear of the immigrant has led to children being locked in cages, split up from their parents because they wanted to start a better life here away from the violence and hate in their country.

The answer to all of these, one way or another, is love.

We have to be ready to make the tough to decisions, to make the hard choice to love those who hate us, to love those who persecute us. Because that love can truly be the answer. Love can conquer hate, and fear, and division, and violence.

The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer spent his life working against the Nazis, advocating for Christians to stand up to their power. But too many of them didn't. Too many stood by as the Nazis implemented the final solution. And he was executed in 1944.

He wrote: "Words and thoughts are not enough. Doing good involves all the things of daily life. [The book of Romans says:] 'If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink.' In the same ways that brothers and sisters stand by each other in times of need, bind up each other's wounds, ease each other's pain, love of the enemy should do good to the enemy. Where in the world is there greater need, where are deeper wounds and pain than those of our enemies? Where is doing good more necessary and more blessed than for our enemies?"

Love for our enemies is so needed and so radical because of the amazing things it can do.

Derek Black grew up in a family devoted to white supremacy. His family were leaders in the Klu Klux Klan. Derek was indoctrinated from a young age; he became a well-known figure in the movement, and was hailed as its future leader.

Derek attended a liberal arts college in Florida. Many in the movement questioned his choice because the school was known for being liberal, multicultural, and gay-friendly. Derek assured them that his goal was to convert people at the school, and not to be converted by them.

His first few months went great. He became friends with an immigrant and a Jew, all the while not talking about white supremacy with his peers.

He was always worried someone would find out his beliefs. And someone finally did. Derek began avoiding other students. Many were scared of him.

But others saw an opening for real change. Matthew, the Jew that had befriended Derek, invited him to a weekly Shabbat dinner. Since the college had few students of the Jewish faith, other friends came to observe Matthew's rituals and have discussions over dinner.

Eventually, the group began discussing white supremacy. They showed Derek through research and friendship that the idea of racial superiority was made up.

After a few months, Derek was convinced. He wrote a long post disavowing white supremacy. He said, "I can't support a movement that tells me I can't be a friend to whomever I wish or that other people's races require me to think about them in a certain way or be suspicious at their advancement."

We must be willing to show the love we have for our neighbor to our enemies. Because that love can be the answer. That love can be what changes them, and what changes society.

In *To Kill A Mockingbird*, Scout's father Atticus is an attorney who defends a falsely accused black man in court, knowing full well that the all-white jury will convict the man and he will lose the case. A neighbor tells Scout,

"We're the safest folks in the world. We're so rarely called on to be Christians, but when we are, we've got men like Atticus to go for us."

We're called to be Christians every day, in all parts of life.

Are we ready?

Or will we look for someone else to do it instead of us?

Christ calls on us to love our neighbors and our enemies constantly. We will fall short and we will sometimes stand by as other Christians take up the call. Because it is hard to show people like neo-Nazis love. I know that I often fall short.

We're sometimes the Priest or the Lawyer instead of being the Samaritan.

But imagine what our world will be like if we try every day to treat everyone as our neighbor.

When we can show love to everyone we encounter in our lives then we will live in a world of peace, where the Kingdom of God is at hand.

There will be no violence, there will be no divisions, there will be no hatred.

Bonhoeffer preached: "Christianity stands or falls with its revolutionary protest against violence, arbitrariness, and pride of power and with its plea for the weak. Christendom adjusts itself far too easily to the worship of power. Christians should give more offense, shock the world far more, than they are doing now."

I feel called to be a minister because we need this kind of Christianity. A moral Christianity that stands for what we believe in, that fights for what is right, that loves all of the neighbors we encounter.

Let's go out and shock the world. Shock those who call us the enemy, shock those who we call the enemy.

Because in Christ's world there is no enemy. There are only neighbors.

Let's shock the world with love.