

Seeing God's Undivided World

The Rev. Michael B. Dangelo

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I've now been a father for two whole months to a beautiful baby girl. And during my long tenure as a father I've collected some important rules for my daughter when she gets old enough to learn them.

Now I don't have any sisters, so most of these rules come from the experience of having been a teenage boy. They're rules I'm sure that will keep a girl safe. Rules like a 5pm curfew. Never date someone whose principle mode of transportation is either a motorcycle or sports car. And the most important: you can't date until you're at least 37.

But I've also learned some important if not more mundane parenting rules that I'll share with her: eat your vegetables, no television until all of your homework is done, learn at least one foreign language and most importantly, probably the first rule I'll ever teach her never talk to strangers.

As I thought about this last rule I realized that human beings have an innate desire to divide the world into safe people and unsafe people. It starts early when we learn that we belong to a family. There are those in our family and they are safe, and then there are those outside of our family and they're usually not so safe. We call those outsiders strangers, and we're taught to be wary of them. Don't talk to strangers. Don't take rides with strangers. Don't take candy from strangers. All of which is very sound advice.

But this division of the world into good people and bad people goes on throughout our lives. As we get older we find that the world is divided into nations and we're told these are the good guys and these are the bad guys. Then we get a little older and find our own nation divided into political parties; this party is right and this party needs its head examined. Even our churches are divided for us; this church speaks for God and this one doesn't. These divisions have enormous consequences for how we act in the world. Eventually, these divisions begin to take on moral weight and somewhere along the line we are either told or we start to think that God divides the world just like we do. And so even the ways we live our Christian lives are somehow bound up in these divisions between good guys and bad guys. These people represent God and these people don't. If I help these people I'll be doing God's work, if I help those people I'll make God angry.

But in the pages of the New Testament, if we look closely, we find something very, very different. Time and time again people come to Jesus of Nazareth looking for validation about the ways they've divided the world. But Jesus never gives it to them. Every time they leave Jesus, they leave with something very different than the answer they expected. Much of Jesus' ministry is about the business of replacing human divisions with a more difficult but richer understanding of what God's love is really about. It's like that in this evening's story of the Good Samaritan.

The story begins when a lawyer, a religious lawyer, comes to Jesus asking, "What do I need to do to inherit eternal life?" The man like all of us is a religious pragmatist. He wants to know how to make sure that God is on his side of things. So Jesus asks him, "What does it say in the Law?" In other words what does it say in the Bible? The lawyer answers, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself." To which Jesus replies, "That's right! Now go and do it." But the lawyer isn't satisfied and asks Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" "Who is my neighbor?" The story about the Good Samaritan is Jesus' answer to this question. "Who is my neighbor?" The question seems simple enough, but Jesus knows better. The man wants to know how God divides up the world. For this man, like many in his day, the world was divided between neighbors and strangers; Jews and non-Jews, good guys and bad guys. And the lawyer believed in this division; God loves some people and hates the others. By asking Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" the man is asking Jesus to tell him how God divides the world.

For a religious pragmatist like the man you NEED to divide people this way; between the good people and the bad people. Because if you are trying to make sure God is on your side you can't be doing good things for the people God doesn't like. There's a chance you might do a good deed for a bad person which would then make your good deed a bad one. It's like aiding and abetting the enemy. On the surface you'd be doing a nice thing you just happen to be doing it for the wrong person. So, if you know ahead of time who the good people are and who the bad people are, then you can keep a good deed from becoming a bad one. This will make sure God is on your side. So the young man asks, "Who is my neighbor?" and Jesus answers with a story.

It's the story of a Jewish traveler who finds himself confronted by robbers on the road. The robbers beat him, take his money, and leave him half dead by the side of the road. As he's lying there a priest from the temple in Jerusalem passes by. Now this priest has the choice: If the traveler is alive, then he can tend his wounds and show mercy and do a good deed. But if the traveler is dead and the priest touches the body he'll break the Law of Moses and by trying to do good he will have done evil. So the priest plays it safe. He decides that the man is dead and keeps walking. He's kept his ritual purity and in his eyes he's done God's will even though he might have helped a dying man. Better to be safe than sorry when you want God on your side. A second man, a Levite, walks by the half-dead traveler and goes through the same theological debate. Better to do nothing and remain pure than to risk making God angry by touching a dead body. So he walks on too.

Finally, a Samaritan man walks by the half-dead traveler. Now, Samaritans were the sworn enemies of the Jews in Jesus' day. The irony is that in the way that the Jews divided the world at the time there was no such thing as a GOOD Samaritan. It would've been an oxymoron like jumbo shrimp or government organization. But that doesn't stop this Samaritan. He stoops down, tends the traveler's wounds, takes him to safety, and pays for his medical care. The Samaritan isn't concerned about this or that legal nuance. He's not concerned about maintaining "God's" divisions. He sees a fellow traveler in need, and he stoops to stop the bleeding. The Samaritan offers compassion and mercy.

Jesus finishes the story and asks the lawyer, “Who was a neighbor to the wounded man?” The lawyer replies, “The one who showed him mercy.”

Jesus has exchanged the lawyer’s question, “WHO is my neighbor?” with the more important one, “Who WAS a neighbor?” The first question “Who is my neighbor?” divides the world into good people and bad ones. It’s a question that forces our divisions of the world on God. It’s a question that expects God to take our side. The second question “Who was a neighbor?” is about the motivations of the human heart. It’s a question that gets rid of those divisions between good people and bad ones, friends and enemies, neighbor and stranger. It calls us to question the motivations of our heart that compel us to divide the world. Then it calls us to exchange our divided worldview for the virtues of Jesus Christ. The virtues of compassion and mercy, just to name two.

The parable of the Good Samaritan shows us a new way to look at the world. It asks us to rethink that human tendency of dividing the world. It asks us to sit with the notion that maybe, just maybe God doesn’t see the world through our divided eyes. Instead the parable of the Good Samaritan shows us the world through the eyes of God. God sees us as wounded travelers on the side of the road. And in God’s mercy comes Jesus Christ to bind up our wounds, carry us to safety, and bring us to new health and new life. And when we realize what has been done for us in Jesus Christ maybe, just maybe we’ll find a new way to see the world. May we learn mercy and compassion, and be neighbors to God’s undivided world.