As we continue our study on Luke’s Gospel, we are going to be looking at four stories that help us better understand what it means to live as a disciple of Jesus Christ who is transforming the world. The four stories that we will consider in this series are:

- The Parable of the Good Samaritan
- The Visit with Mary and Martha
- The Teaching on Prayer
- The Power of Possessions

So this first week our focus story is the Parable of the Good Samaritan. This is such a familiar story that we think that we’ve got it, already!! But maybe we miss the point of the story. In the parable, when the lawyer (who was not a lawyer like we think of a lawyer, but really more like a seminary professor or a highly educated clergyperson), correctly identifies the Samaritan as the neighbor, Jesus responds with the words, “That’s the right answer; do this and you will live.” Many times when we read Jesus’ initial response we focus on the “do this.” And so we interpret the parable to mean that Jesus is telling the lawyer (and us) to go and be good Samaritans by noticing those in need and helping them. In other words, we think Jesus was telling the Good Samaritan to go and do something.

But let’s look at this story in a different way. Maybe Jesus wasn’t telling this man to DO something so much as he was challenging him to SEE the world around him, especially its people, in a different way. To put it another way, perhaps it isn’t so much about what we do as it is about how we live.

Margot Starbuck tells this story in Small Things with Great Love, Adventures in Loving Your Neighbor: She is writing about how overwhelming it
can be to engage with a world in need….””Because managing laundry, a Visa bill, Email and dinner are already unwieldy enough, entering into a relationship with someone who is poor can feel more than a little daunting. This awareness is never more palpable than when I think of my friend Hugh, who shares life with folks who are homeless in nearby Raleigh, North Carolina. When I think of Hugh, I can start to feel guilty as I mentally scroll through all the ways I’m not engaged with the poor. This list is quite extensive.

Recently Hugh had a chance to share with one local church that was filled with very well-meaning people. He challenged them to consider investing in relationships that cross boundaries of shelter and race and religion and income and class. One churchy guy there named Chuck was inspired by the vision. Like me, he’d bought into the big idea about Christians loving folks who live on the margins; at the same time, he wanted Hugh to hear what his life was like.

“I commute at least one hour, each way to my job,” explained Chuck. “I work at Research Triangle Park. I love what I do and I work hard at it. The one day of the week I do have at home with my family, I don’t want to go to the park and meet homeless people.”

Often it’s best to just lay it out there.

Hugh thought for a moment, and then asked Chuck, “Do you have an office?”

“Yes…” Chuck replied, not sure where this was heading.

Hugh continued, “Is there someone who cleans your office?”

“Yes,” Chuck carefully answered again. “There’s a woman who cleans my office two or three times a week.”

“What’s her name?” Hugh asked.
“I don’t know her name,” Chuck admitted.
Hugh pressed, “How long has she been cleaning your office?”
“Seven or eight years,” Chuck estimated. By that point he was begin-
ing to catch on.

Several weeks later, Hugh answered his ringing phone and heard a
voice blurt out, “Her name is Regina!” Chuck had taken the time to meet the
woman who cleaned his office, and he had learned Regina was working two jobs
to provide for her children.

“You know this has messed me up, right?” Chuck demanded of
Hugh. By “messed up,” he meant that being in relationship with Regina had sort
of ruffled the comfortable, insulated life he’d been enjoying.

Smiling to himself, Hugh acknowledged, “I know.”

You want to know just how messed up Chuck’s life got? Chuck’s
family and Regina’s family spent Christmas together last year.

It was a holy mess.”

Margot Starbuck continues: “Before cuing the violin music, I want
to say that I think Chuck made a pretty valid point about his regular responsibil-
ities. The formative reality for many of us is that, at the end of the day, we’re too
exhausted to get up off the couch after watching Modern Family, let along garner
the energy to go out and make new friends. Although we’re not proud of it, the
daily reality of our lives is that lawn-mowing and grocery-shopping and oil-chang-
ing and laundry-folding really do demand our energy and attention. Faced with
our own needs and the needs of the world, we attend to that which seems more
urgent. Then, with whatever energy is left, we feel bad about it.

For most of us, there just aren’t enough hours in the day to have
a cook-out with our families and feed the poor. We don’t have enough energy
to do all our errands at Home Depot and Walmart and also care about adequate
shelter and clothing for those in need. When we’ve got to choose between lay-
ing out two thousand bucks on car repairs or scraping together enough to buy a
reliable used vehicle, we’re not exactly pining for the kinds of new friends who’ll
inevitably ask us for rides. Though we certainly admire and applaud the modern
saints like Hugh who engage in relationship with the poor professionally—in inner-
city neighborhoods and on the foreign mission field—our daily lives are of a
different order.

Our lives are already full.

They’re not full of bad stuff, either. No square on my calendar re-
minds me to commit a homicide or torture cute Dalmatian puppies. In fact, one
reminder prompts me to coordinate the nursery volunteers at my church. A few
more squares on my calendar remind me to take walks with friends. Several have
me scheduled to take care of other people’s children after school. One means I
get to eat a yummy dinner, cooked by my husband, with neighbors who are local
grad students. I like that one a lot. Another has me meeting and praying with the
church small group that meets in my home. A bunch of squares remind me to
drive or fly places to talk about God, and even how much God loves the poor.

No one would say that my life is not full of good stuff.

Here’s the rub: a lot of us with rich, full lives do take seriously
Jesus’ command to love our neighbors the way we love ourselves. We’re even
willing to entertain the probability that his signature “good Samaritan” definition
of neighbor calls us to befriend the unlikely and sometimes inconvenient type of
person he describes in the story. And so the rich, full lives we lead, packed with
important stuff---but without much margin left over to know those who live on the world’s margins-sort of begs an important question.

Is God scowling in judgment because we’re changing batteries in our smoke detectors instead of going door to door collecting eyeglasses to send to Haiti? Is God looking down from heaven feeling sort of resentful that we’re using the “look inside” function on Amazon.com instead of visiting prisoners? Isn’t God angry that Americans keep getting fatter while so many on the globe are starving? You’d think so, right? A world in which a God who loves the poor would be a little bent out of shape that the rest of us are so darn self-involved is pretty imaginable.

And although it’s certainly easy to conjure up that kind of heavenly dichotomy, I simply don’t think it’s the case. Here’s why: God’s love for you and God’s love for the larger world in need cannot be separated. God’s longing to see you liberated for life that really is life can’t be nearly pulled apart from God’s longing to see the poor liberated for life that really is life. The two are inextricable. God’s concern for the stuff of our lives, and God’s concern for the lives of those who live on the margins, can never be neatly parsed.” We can’t separate one from the other or pick & choose which one we will include in our priorities. God’s love for you and God’s love for the larger world are a package deal—if you are a Christian, that is!!

In her commentary on this passage Rev. Dawn Chesser writes about being in seminary and taking an extended unit of Clinical Pastoral Education. “I remember that one of the first things I learned about being a chaplain in a hospital was that our work was not to DO something. Our job was to simply BE with our patients. Our role was to sit beside people during a time of need and to be a loving
presence. We were to be living reminders of the grace of God shown in Jesus Christ.”

It’s easy to see why we get focused on doing when we read the parable. After all, the first question that the lawyer asked Jesus was a “do” question: “What should I DO to inherit eternal life?” And Jesus told him right away what he should DO: “love the Lord God with all your heart and soul and strength and mind and your neighbor as yourself.” This is what we are to DO as followers of Jesus Christ. What we are to DO is make disciples of Jesus Christ.

But the second question, the one that prompted Jesus to tell the parable, was not a DO question. It was a BE question. The lawyer wanted to know whom Jesus considered to be his “neighbor.” It was in response to this second question that Jesus told the parable about the Good Samaritan. And Jesus’ meaning is clear. He told the lawyer in no uncertain terms that he must BE a neighbor to those he considered ritually unclean, socially unacceptable, and morally corrupt.

To inherit eternal life, Jesus says, we must be in loving relationship with all of God’s children, especially those with whom we disagree, would judge as sinful, or even despise. As United Methodist, this is the “parable” that speaks to the second part of our mission statement. By living in this way, we participate in God’s transformation of the world.

Many of us seem to get stuck with the same problem that the lawyer had. We think that the way to inherit eternal life is to DO something: say the right words, believe the right things, have the right kind of baptism, give the right in this life. In this way of thinking, we have complete control of our eternal destiny. We simple earn our way to eternal life by doing the right things. But Jesus says that the way to find eternal life is not by doing something, but by
BEING something. Specifically, it is by being the kind of person the Good Samaritan was. Eternal life is discovered by living in the way of Christ for the transformation of the world.

What kind of person was the Samaritan? He was a person who, first and foremost, was neither frightened nor apathetic when he happened upon a situation of injustice in his community. The text doesn’t say why the Samaritan was walking the road from Jerusalem to Jericho that day. I don’t know if he was on his way home from visiting relatives, or heading to work. But my sense of the story is that he was not out on a mission to do justice that day. He was not on a mission trip, or on his way to volunteer at the local food pantry, or headed to Wednesday night fellowship at his church. In other words, he was not specifically engaged in being his “church self” at that moment. The other two people who saw the robbed, wounded and half dead man lying on the side of the road are specifically named as church people. One is a priest, and the other is a Levite.

But we don’t know anything about the Samaritan other than his status as a Samaritan. Luke does not say he was a leader among the Samaritans. He is not identified as a priest, or even as a particularly observant Samaritan. The only thing we know about him personally is that he is a member of a group that is a despised rival of the Jews. And we know from the story that he was traveling along a well-known road, minding his own business, when suddenly he came upon a situation of violence and injustice happening right before his eyes. He saw a man who had been hurt, and his response was not to run in the other direction, but rather to immediately go to the side of this victim of a senseless crime and offer his assistance.

He is so moved with pity that he stops his travel plans in order
to care for this man. He didn’t call for someone else, some professional, to come to the man’s aid. He didn’t summon the police or an ambulance. He personally cleaned and bandaged the man’s wounds, and then he loaded the individual on his own horse and carried the man to an Inn, where he presumably paid for a room and stayed with the man and nursed him overnight. The next day, he paid for the man to be able to stay there and rest until he recovered. He asked the innkeeper to keep an eye on the man. And he promised to pay for any additional time the wounded man needed to stay beyond the days he paid in advance.

This Samaritan didn’t just do something for this wounded stranger. He took time away from whatever it was he had planned to do that day. He let an encounter with injustice change his course of action entirely. He delayed the remainder of his trip in order to stay and sit with the man until he knew the man would be okay. And he promised to come back and check on him.

Now I don’t know about you, but when I am on a road trip, whether it is driving back to Denver for my time off from work, or driving with George on a vacation around Wyoming back roads and sites, or heading up to Estes Park for a few days, and I see someone stopped on the side of the road, I don’t stop to help. Why? Most often because I don’t want to take time away from my own plans, nor do I want to make myself vulnerable. Also, if I saw someone in what looked like a dangerous situation, someone who had been beaten, or who had been shot or wounded, I’m not sure what I would do. I might pull over and call the police, but I’m not sure I’d approach the car. I’m just being honest here. My tendency is to think first about whether my actions might put me in danger.

When I think about my own responses to Jesus’ challenge to us all to be a neighbor not just in situations in which we don’t have much information,
but to be willing to take risks for anyone in need, I know that I have some work to do in my own practice of potentially world-changing discipleship. Jesus calls us to put not just our time, but our money and our very lives on the table in order to make God’s merciful presence known anytime and anywhere the opportunity arises.

This isn’t a story about finding easy opportunities to do some good works in our communities. It isn’t even a story about answering the call to give substantially to support those in great need, or to sacrificially go and serve in the places in the world where people suffer. This is a story about how we are to live as disciples every single day, right here at home, in our own neighborhoods and churches. It is a call to see the needs of the people we meet on a walk, or in the grocery store, or on our way to do something else, and to not think first about our own safety or our own agendas, but rather to live as people who willingly let the needs of the world around us interrupt our plans so that we never miss an opportunity to offer mercy to all of God’s children. This, says Jesus, is how we transform the world. How are you responding to God’s call to be the kind of neighbor who is willing to offer God’s mercy to all???