

I remember the answers, though I am not sure I can exactly remember the question. But the answers I heard were all about the same, “I want to help someone – really make a difference for someone.” Six or eight were gathered that night on the couches back there in the lounge. Some of you may have been in the group that night – I cannot even remember who was there. But I remember the answers – each, one after another saying, “I want to help someone – I want to really make a difference for someone who needs help.”

Think about who was really feeling great in the story Jesus told. The priest who made it to his appointment on time? I’ve tried out the part of that priest a number of times – at the end of the day there is a nagging feeling that I should have stopped.

Was the Levite doing any better? Probably not. Maybe he was so used to walking by that he never gave the man in the ditch another thought but there would be no joy in this at the end of the day.

How about the man who had been beaten? Well, maybe he was grateful to have been rescued. But more likely he was so near to death that he would not remember being rescued. He would only remember the pain – the agony of his time of recovery.

Who was really feeling great at the end of the day? The Samaritan. He had saved a life. He had treated the wounds with oil and wine, bandaged the wounds – taken the beaten man to the inn and promised to pay for all his care. What a great feeling to know that you did the right thing and did it well. Completely.

This is what every person sitting in the lounge that night wanted. Every one of us wanted to be able to say, “I fed a hungry person and I saved her life. I did what it took to get her back on her feet – and now she is doing well.”

Each wanted to be able to say, “I devoted myself to raising my child and my child is happy and successful and kind and loving and grateful to me.”

Or to say, “I tutored the disadvantaged child and that child learned to read and has graduated from high school and will be enrolling at Tri C this fall.”

Or to say, “I offered myself in the Sunday school and twenty years later one of my students came back and told me that he has had Jesus as a friend because of me.”

To help someone and to know that it really made a difference is the greatest feeling in all the world.

I knew at that meeting that night that if we could have just found some people with signs on their chests that said, “I need someone to help me and I will use that help well” we would really be in business. But people who are advertising to be helped usually are not helped at all. They are just dependent. Give one of them one hundred dollars this week and he will need \$125 the next. That gets old quickly.

Or there is the one who really needs help – that’s obvious – but she is not going to let you run her life. You help but she does not start making good choices and again it feels like your help is being poured into an empty pit.

So where can we find someone who needs help and who will really make good use of that help?

I think that is the question God the Father, and God the Son and God the Holy Spirit have been asking for a long, long time. God wants to make a difference – to feel good at the end of the day because God really helped someone out. Not just throwing good money after bad – giving and giving and giving to someone who becomes more and more dependent on the gifts. Answering prayer after prayer after prayer only to find that there is no change – no improvement. All sorts of advice offered, all of it ignored. God wants to make a difference.

Now that lawyer who came to Jesus that day was certain that God does want to make a difference in “them”. For him “them” was Samaritans, and sinners and Gentiles – all the folks who really did not do as God wanted them to do. For us sitting in the lounge that night “them” might have been single mothers, or teenagers in trouble, or people who are on welfare. But when Jesus told the story it was not a story of us helping them but of one of the “them” group helping one of us. Backwards. For Jesus knew that the one who really needed changing was that lawyer. And me.

I can't speak for the others gathered in the lounge that night but I can tell about me. I think that my need to help others is not so much that I am so filled with love that that love is overflowing, bursting at the seams, needing to be shared. No – I think instead that when I most need to help others it is because of the hollowness and emptiness I am feeling within. When my efforts to help are unsuccessful I grow bitter and weary because I needed the success so I could feel better about me.

The lawyer who came to Jesus wanted to justify himself, he wanted to be able to say, "I'm doing fine." But Jesus wanted him to be changed - us to be changed.

Jesus does not seek to help us, teach us, lead us, bless us so that he can feel better about himself. Not hollowness but love is in the heart of Jesus. And he wants to pour that love into you. The lawyer thought the key to life was what he would do. But the key to life is what Jesus would do for him.

And you. Jesus gave his life for you. Before you even were, Jesus gave his life for you. And through his death on the cross gives you the promise of eternal life. Whether you are a Samaritan who stops to help or a member of the clergy who walks right on by Jesus gives his love to you. His life for you.

So what if I am not changed, never bursting with love but mostly empty, hollow? You would like to help me, I know. And I you. Jesus will change us through one another. Not us helping them but we, helping and being helped by one another until there is not longer a them, only a we.