

Local churches of the United Church of Christ have permission to use the script below in its entirety with full attribution.

“Into the Deep: The One Who Showed Mercy” based on Luke 10:25-37

Written for Sunday, July 13, 2025

By Rev. Dr. Cheryl A. Lindsay, Minister for Worship and Theology, United Church of Christ

The One Who Showed Mercy

Tests. There are different types of tests. In education, there are tests to determine comprehension of a subject. Sometimes, pre-tests provide an assessment of gaps in knowledge and opportunities for growth before the education process begins. The tests administered following the impartation of information demonstrates the progress made by the student and may also serve as an indicator of the efficacy of teaching strategies. Some tests lead to credentialing such as the bar exam for attorneys, the Candidate Physical Ability Test for firefighters, or the Medical Licensing Examination for physicians. These evaluations also serve as entry points in professional practice and help to maintain standards for the respective fields.

Of course, we don't only have tests associated with school or work. Tests may prove our ability to do something such as driving tests that enable us to operate motor vehicles. Other tests may assess the functioning of our bodies, such as eye exams, hearing tests, and stress tests. The results do not reflect aptitude; rather, they may point to the need for intervention to facilitate living a fuller, flourishing life.

Less formal tests also enter our lives. Running a marathon offers a test of endurance. Personality tests help us understand ourselves and each other. Some members in our faith communities may share that a challenging situation or time in their lives tested their faith. There's a reason it's called a testimony.

Inherent in our understanding of the act of testifying is that a witness is required. Someone, with knowledge, proof, or evidence, shares that with others who need to hear from someone who knows.

In the gospel reading, the passage opens with a statement that an expert stood up to test Jesus. We could give them the benefit of the doubt. Maybe they were looking for Jesus to testify. More likely, this encounter was yet another instance of a religious leader taking issue with Jesus and opening up an antagonistic dialogue.

Frankly, being tested—quizzed or questioned—was not new to Jesus or the Triune God:

The Holy One said to Moses, “10 Now go, I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.” 11 But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” (Ex 3:10–11)

The Book of Habbakuk opens with the prophet’s questioning complaint:

2 O LORD, how long shall I cry for help,
and you will not listen?

Or cry to you “Violence!”
and you will not save?

3 Why do you make me see wrongdoing
and look at trouble?

(Hab 1:2–3)

In Psalm 22, David begins by asking:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? (Ps 22:1)

We recognize the first part of that as one of the cries Jesus utters from the cross, turning the psalmist’s test into their own.

From that example and others, we know that testing God is not a problem for the Sovereign One. In fact, in Malachi 3:10, the Holy One explicitly invites testing:

10 Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing.

The gospels continue the testing story.

When the angel visits Mary and invites her to participate in the Incarnation and mothering Jesus, she asks, “How can this be?”

The disciples frequently asked Jesus questions or sought further teaching:

Rabbi, they would call him Teacher, so their questions often began with an acknowledgement that they were seeking to learn from him, they used his title to demonstrate honor and respect.

Rabbi, they quizzed him,

Some say you are Elijah or John the Baptist

Rabbi, they asked,

Teach us how to pray.

Rabbi, what will be the sign of your coming?

Do you not see that we are perishing?

Zora Neale Hurston wrote in her famed book, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, “There are years that ask questions and years that answer.” It seems to me that those years aren’t evenly split. The years that ask seem to outnumber the years that answer. Or, the answers are incomplete.

What are the questions of your life? What questions do the current conditions of our world prompt you to ponder?

Maybe you're like the disciples and you've been working toward something and you want to know what the future holds. Maybe you've been holding onto hope and you seek assurance that your hope is not in vain.

Maybe your question is like Mary, something wonderful, amazing, incredible presents itself to you and you ask, "How can this be?"

Or, on the other hand, something unbelievable, catastrophic, devastating happens and you cry out, "How can this be?"

Because we can ask the same question using the same words, but the shift in tone makes all the difference. Circumstances dictate our disposition. Relationship reframes the dialogue.

The leader who stands up to Jesus presumably did not have a congenial tone. They may have been polite enough, respectful enough, but underneath the question is an adversarial intention. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" The text reads more like a courtroom case than a classroom, and Jesus responds accordingly by posing questions to the legal expert in response.

Again, it's not a new or unique strategy for Jesus who seems to enjoy asking questions as much as answering them:

- Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? (Matthew 6:27)
- If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? (Matthew 5:46)
- Who do you say I am? (Matthew 16:15)
- What good will it be to gain the whole world, yet forfeit the soul? (Matthew 16:26)
- Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again?
- Why do you call me good? (Mark 10:18)
- Are you asleep? Could you not keep watch for one hour? (Mark 14:37)
- Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house? (Luke 2:49)
- Why are you thinking these things in your hearts? (Luke 5:22)
- Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'? (Luke 5:23)
- Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say? (Luke 6:46)
- Where is your faith? (Luke 8:25)
- Who touched me? (Luke 8:45)
- Will you be lifted up to the skies? (Luke 10:15)
- Do you love me? (John 21:16)

There is the Christ who answers questions and the Christ who asks them.

And here, Jesus turns the test back on the tester and asks the legal expert to answer their own question: "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?"

Biblical scholar John T. Carroll writes:

[quote] The motive underlying the man's approach to Jesus may be suspect, but his knowledge of the Torah is not. He answers in v. 27 with a deft quotation of Scripture that splices together the commandment to love God with one's whole being (Deut 6:5) and the commandment to love neighbor as oneself (Lev 19:18)....Jesus endorses this response: "You've answered correctly. Do this, and you will live" (Luke 10:28)....Thus far the legal scholar and Jesus agree, and the view they share is uncontroversial. Yet the examiner presses Jesus on one interpretive detail: "And who is my neighbor?" (v. 29). Just who is this neighbor whom the Torah requires me to love? [end quote]

The text says, the legal expert asks this question in order to vindicate himself. The perspective is legal so are the terms being used. It's a courtroom case, not a classroom. It's a debate not a discussion. The legal expert has been caught in their own questioning; therefore, they try to salvage the situation by issuing a new test: who is my neighbor?

Who deserves my concern? Who is worthy of my care and consideration? Who must I love?

If I must love my neighbor, who do I get to exclude from the list? Who must I muster up a change of attitude and action to pass this test?

The legal expert's question is limiting. They are looking for ways to shrink the box marked neighbor and want Jesus to justify their discriminatory stance.

Rather than respond with a new question immediately, Jesus tells a story—a parable that makes the point.

A victim of a violent crime has been left for dead on the side of the road and the question the story addresses is who will help them. Who will respond from a place of compassion rather than convenience? Who will be moved to action rather than just move quickly on from the scene? A priest, someone charged and privileged with leadership in the faith community walks on by. A Levite, another person with designated power and authority in the religious community, could not be bothered. It's the Samaritan, the one not only from outside the community, but one despised and demeaned by the community, who not only notices the man and acknowledges the urgent need, but who takes action to help him and ensure his continued care and wellbeing.

After that setup, then Jesus asks the question, "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor?"

The legal expert must have been so mad. Not only has Jesus not fallen into the trap the so-called expert set, Jesus has turned the question around.

The question is not who do I have to love. The question is am I one who loves? The way we show up in the world is not dictated by the actions or identities of others but by the attitude of our hearts and the ways that attitude manifests in our actions.

The legal expert has no real choice. Jesus has not offered any other viable option for the legal expert to suggest except the Samaritan. Of course, in their answer, they can't even bring themselves to acknowledge their identity as a Samaritan so they answer by describing their actions. Even in this, Jesus uses their own prejudices to make the point.

The one who showed mercy. That's the answer.

The one who shows mercy does not give based on what they think someone deserves, they respond to what the person needs.

It's not mercy when we impose litmus tests on our generosity.

It's not mercy when our love comes with conditions attached.

It's not mercy when we give to the poor and then monitor and disparage their choices.

It's also not mercy when we offer a cheapened and performative version of compassion that still prioritizes our convenience over sustainability and restoration.

When we say we are welcoming to all communities and identities until someone desires to serve in leadership or requests accommodations to increase accessibility.

When we claim to care about education but eliminate funding for Head Start.

When we celebrate Mothers and Fathers Days but do not make space for children in our sanctuaries.

Or even when we offer absolution without accountability under the guise of loving our neighbor when really we're placating our neighbor and avoiding fruitful conflict because we don't want to do the hard work of reconciliation and repair. Or, we want to preserve friendliness rather than be a real friend who challenges another to grow, to change, and to make things right.

The answer is clear even if it's inconvenient. Some might say, it's tight but it's right.

There are times when Jesus asks the question and there are times when Jesus answers the question. There are times when Jesus administers the test, and there are times when Jesus takes the test.

Like us, Jesus' life was full of tests. There were the moments of temptation when the adversary met Jesus in the wilderness following a forty day baptismal retreat. There were the moments of vulnerability and agony in the garden and on the cross when Jesus asked the questions so many of us have asked during the most trying parts of our lives, "Take this cup from me." Jesus petitioned. "Do I really have to do this?" We might ask. "My God My God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus cried. "Where is God? Is God real?" We may wonder.

Those are the questions. Still, there are answers.

Not my will but your will be done.
Into your hands I commit my spirit.

And perhaps, these are the mantras to adopt to cultivate a pervasive and persistence posture of love.

And with the path of Jesus to follow and the power of the Spirit to guide,
In times of trouble and heartbreak
When our own needs rise to the surface
When popular culture tells a different story
When anger and bitterness threaten to overwhelm
When it feels like we're swimming upstream
When our dreams have turned to nightmares
When hope has faded to despair

May we be the ones to proclaim the goodness of God in the land of the living
May we plant ourselves upon the Solid Rock
May we declare that despite contrary accounts, God is still with us
May we pick up our cross or share someone else's heavy burden
May we raise our voices in the name of Jesus and support of our neighbor
May we embody what looks like lived out
And when the story is told, may the account of our actions reflect that we were
The ones who showed mercy.

Amen.