

West Valley Church
2/12/12

Awkward Family Photos, Part Four **Acts 2:42-47**

Church directories are chock full of awkward family photos that fit what we've been talking about during this series. I'm sure you've had them taken—the photographer arranged you by height, tilted your heads, placed your hand on someone's shoulder, and made you stare without blinking until your eyes cracked and then told you to “look natural” and smile. The result was an awkwardly posed portrait that didn't look natural at all.

Today we are in part four of our series called “Awkward Family Photos.” There are all kinds of reasons a photo can be awkward—right? But you know it when you see it. Let me give you some examples of family photos that are awkward. These are from a website called awkwardfamilyphotos.com.

For example, people often have their picture taken with their pets. But this girl might be identifying a little too closely with her dog. I think they both must have the same hairdresser... This next family might have gone a little overboard in their matching clothes. The girls are holding dolls that also have the same clothes, but you can't tell because they are camouflaged! This next family is just plain corny. I know, so is that joke. Now here's an interesting family photo that must include their favorite activity. I wonder if their last name is Bowman? I know—more corny jokes. Now look at this family—what looks like a very nice family photo. I just wonder, do you think that baby has any chance of NOT needing glasses? We've all taken pictures of our kids going off to their first day of school, right? In this next photo, I think this girl's little brother doesn't share her same enthusiasm for school. Finally, this last photo is an example of something I told you about a few weeks ago—a family from the 70's with their 70's style, with the ghostly picture of a large dad's head floating in the background. That guy in the middle looks really weird....

We've all got these in our family photo albums or on our walls—awkward photos. But I wonder if sometimes, to those outside the church, the picture they see of us is similar. Instead of a natural image of a healthy family of God, they see people posing; trying to act like something they're not, leaving an awkward impression. So how can we move from being posed in an awkward photo to the real thing? What would that “look” like? Are we presenting a natural picture of the church as a family, or are we trying to look like something we're really not?

The Bible gives us a family portrait of the church that is anything but awkward –

it's the very picture of health. It is in Acts, chapter two, verse 42-47. We're using this series to challenge ourselves to avoid posing. We want the picture of West Valley Church to be natural and not awkward. So look at what the passage says:

“All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper), and to prayer. A deep sense of awe came over them all, and the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders. And all the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had. They sold their property and possessions and shared the money with those in need. They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity—all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people. And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved.” (Acts 2:42-47,nlt)

So far, we've seen that a picture of the church is of believers who are unified, passionately committed together to God's Word. We've seen that the church is worshiping, praying, and sharing together in communion. Last week we saw that a natural picture of the church is one that is growing by introducing people to Jesus Christ and welcoming them to be a part of the community of believers. Today we want to see the last picture, and that is how the church cared for each other and those in need. This particular attribute is mentioned more than any other in those verses we read earlier:

(Act 2:42) “All the believers devoted themselves to fellowship, and to sharing in meals ...”

(Act 2:44-45) “And all the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had. They sold their property and possessions and shared the money with those in need.”

(Act 2:46) “They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity...”

This is a picture of the church that is sharing meals together, sharing possessions as they were needed, and even selling what they had so that they could give the money to those who needed it. This wasn't like some kind of cult commune; this was people who looked outside themselves, saw needs, and actively cared for them. They were eager to take care of people both inside and outside of the church. To put it simply, *they cared*. They put their faith to work and cared for those in need. There's nothing awkward about that picture—it is as natural a picture of the church as there is.

But look at the picture of the world around us. The picture of our world is more than awkward; it's painful. There are hurting and lonely people on every street of

this city. Many of them needing a prayer, or a meal, or a friend. Many of them dying without Christ, without knowing they are loved at all, let alone by us and by God.

I want to show you the characteristics of a church that cares, and we find those characteristics in an excellent example that Jesus gave us when he told a story as it's recorded in the Gospel of Luke:

“Just then a religion scholar stood up with a question to test Jesus. ‘Teacher, what do I need to do to get eternal life?’ He answered, ‘What's written in God's Law? How do you interpret it?’ He said, ‘That you love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and muscle and intelligence--and that you love your neighbor as well as you do yourself.’ ‘Good answer!’ said Jesus. ‘Do it and you'll live.’ Looking for a loophole, he asked, ‘And just how would you define 'neighbor'?’ Jesus answered by telling a story. ‘There was once a man traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho. On the way he was attacked by robbers. They took his clothes, beat him up, and went off leaving him half-dead. Luckily, a priest was on his way down the same road, but when he saw him he angled across to the other side. Then a Levite religious man showed up; he also avoided the injured man. A Samaritan traveling the road came on him. When he saw the man's condition, his heart went out to him. He gave him first aid, disinfecting and bandaging his wounds. Then he lifted him onto his donkey, led him to an inn, and made him comfortable. In the morning he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take good care of him. If it costs any more, put it on my bill--I'll pay you on my way back.' ‘What do you think? Which of the three became a neighbor to the man attacked by robbers?’ ‘The one who treated him kindly,’ the religion scholar responded. Jesus said, ‘Go and do the same.’” (Luke 10:25-37, niv)

We are told that the man who questioned Jesus was a lawyer, but he wasn't the kind of lawyer that we think of. He was a lawyer because he was an expert in the Old Testament law; you might say that he was an Old Testament scholar. So when he asked Jesus what he had to do to make sure he could get to heaven, he was asking what the essential commandment was in the law. See, he thought he had Jesus over a barrel. If Jesus answered him, He'd be in trouble because he would be saying that the other laws weren't as important. If Jesus didn't answer, he would come across as inept to his followers. But instead of answering him, Jesus says, “What do you think it is?” So the man tells Jesus, “Love God and love your neighbor.” And Jesus said, “You're right! Now go and do it!”

So the guy was a pretty good lawyer because right away he's looking for a loop hole. He says, “Well then, who exactly is my neighbor?” In other words, “Who and how much do I have to care?” I think that's a question we all would ask; we

try to reduce God's commands to something that doesn't demand too much from us. We would like to believe that loving my neighbor means loving people who love me, or at least loving people who will probably do nice things back to me. That's what the lawyer thought, too.

So Jesus' answer is to tell the man "Someone who cares like this looks like this . . ." and then he tells the story. Jesus' story describes what caring, compassionate love looks like in real life. He tells the story of a man traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho. That trip was known for being treacherous. The distance from Jerusalem to Jericho is about seventeen miles, descending sharply toward the Jordan River just north of the Dead Sea. The road curved through rugged bleak, rocky terrain where robbers could easily hide. It was considered especially dangerous, even in a day when travel was normally full of hazards. In fact, this particular road was known as "the way of blood." So this is a very believable story to those who were listening. Here are some of the lessons that Jesus taught us about caring for others. Remember, this is the picture of the kind of caring we should have. The first is:

1. Caring is based on need, not worth

Jesus describes a man who was attacked by thieves, stripped of his clothing, badly beat up and left for dead. Our compassion, our caring is to be driven not by the worth of the recipient but by the need of the recipient. This man, worthy or not, was in great need.

As this unknown victim lay beside the road a series of three individuals came by, one at a time. The first one to walk by was a priest. When the priest saw the victim all bloody and barely dressed, instead of stopping to help he crossed over to the other side of the road and avoided the man. Now, if you know your Old Testament really good, you would say that the priest wasn't allowed to touch the man because it would have made the priest unclean and then he couldn't perform his ceremonial duties. And you would be right. Except that Jesus said that the man was walking "down the road." That means he was walking away from Jerusalem, which means he had finished his duties and was going home.

To the listeners, this was the most shocking part of the story. The priest was considered the holiest person that there was. He was taught the Scriptures inside and out. He was the one entrusted with offering sacrifices on behalf of the people for their sins. He was one of the select few that could go into the furthest part, the holiest part of the Temple. If anybody would act like God, he would. But instead, he avoided the guy and went to the other side of the road.

The second guy that comes by is in verse 32—a Levite. The Levite would have been like a church board member. He was a lay-leader in the Temple. This guy was a little better than the first; the Levite came and looked at the victim (before he

walked by without helping). I guess it's human nature to look at an accident like that. Once as a youth pastor I was taking teens on a bus trip, and we drove by a terrible auto accident with severely injured people—it was a bloody scene. The police and emergency responders were there, but they had just started working. Traffic was getting thick on the four-lane freeway, so I told our driver to go to the farthest lane away from the accident and not to say anything; I would try to distract the kids by making some kind of announcement from a seat on the opposite side of the bus. It was all working well until the bus was right at the scene, and one of our adult sponsors yelled “Oh No! That’s gruesome! Kids! Don’t look at the accident on this side of the bus!” Guess what they did? The bus almost tipped over from the entire group rushing to that side. That’s probably part of what the second guy was doing. The problem is, there was no one else there to help and he didn't stop. The first two men didn't want to get involved. They didn't want any trouble. Getting involved would be messy. They saw the need but didn't do anything about it. This was a sin of omission; they *didn't* do what they should have done. They ignored the need. Their religion didn't make any difference in the way they lived.

Caring isn't based on whether someone deserves it; simply if they have a need. Second,

2. Caring is passionate

It feels something. It's not that our obedience is based on feelings, but it can't help but feel for the person in need. Next was the third person that came along. He was a Samaritan. Jews and Samaritans absolutely hated each other. Jews thought that Samaritans were lower than dogs. Calling someone a Samaritan was a curse word. Samaritans were considered “half-breeds” both physically and spiritually. It would have been more realistic if Jesus would've said that the Samaritan finished off the Jew by killing him—that's how much they hated each other. Because of this story, the term “Good Samaritan” has come to mean someone who does something nice for someone else. But that was the furthest thing from the truth when Jesus told it. To say “Good Samaritan” was an oxymoron, like “Jumbo Shrimp” or “congressional leadership.”

But Jesus said that when the Samaritan saw the victim, he had compassion, and the word that Jesus used in Greek was very literal; it comes from the same word that means “bowels” or “intestines.” It's the same thing as when we talk about a “gut feeling.” A gut feeling comes from the deepest part of who we are; it's innate. The Samaritan saw this victim on the side of the road and got a churning in his gut. His heart burned in him for this poor guy and he *had* to stop and help the guy. He couldn't pass by without helping him. That's the kind of caring we're talking about. It stirs us, it burdens us, it troubles us. It keeps us awake at night until we

do something about it.

There was no logical reason for the Samaritan to change his schedule and give his time and money to a natural enemy. Of all the people that saw the victim, the Samaritan had the best excuse to walk by. But we care because we feel something for the person in need. Not because they deserve it or are worth it, but because they need it. And, naturally then,

3. Caring is *active*

The Samaritan's care was based on need, not worth, and was passionate—he felt it deeply. It was so passionate that he couldn't help but do something about it—he didn't just feel sorry for the guy, he acted on it. He went to the guy, bandaged him up, and cleansed his wounds with oil and wine. Oil and wine were considered to have medicinal qualities. They were generally expensive, too. He doesn't avoid the guy and go to the other side. He went toward the guy. If we are going to care, we have to move toward people in need, not avoid them. Caring action is not going to magically happen in us; God's not going to just overtake you and make you do it. You will always be faced with the choice to act or not. It will take effort and it is rarely convenient. And remember, if the victim were conscious he would've rejected the Samaritan's help. I guarantee the wounded Jew would not have helped the Samaritan if the roles were reversed. Sometimes, when you help others, they'll reject it. But we still care, and act.

Jesus used six action words—verbs—to describe the unselfish action of the Samaritan. Jesus said he *went* to the man. He *bandaged* his wounds (probably using his own clothes to do it). He *poured* oil and wine on his wounds. He *put him on* his own donkey. That meant that the Samaritan had to walk. He *brought* him to an inn and he *took care* of him.

In every one of his acts he demonstrated caring and compassion by responding in a practical, timely, and unselfish way. He took the time. He was a man of some means, so he was probably a busy man and had somewhere to go, but he stopped and took at least an hour if not several hours to help this guy. We can't help everyone everywhere, but we can help someone. Someone once watched Mother Theresa helping care for people, and for everyone she helped there were hundreds more. They said to her "You might as well quit. How will you ever help all these people? It's impossible." She said, "You start with the face Jesus puts in front of you." That's caring. It acts; it does something. We can't just stand by and do nothing. It also costs something:

4. Caring always *costs something*

The Samaritan really went the extra mile. He not only cleaned him up and helped

him; he personally took the guy to an inn and saw to it that the innkeeper looked out for the guy until he recovered. He gave the innkeeper two silver coins. That was two whole days' wages, which would have kept the man for up to two months in an inn. Even if he was at the Motel Six that would've been almost \$2000. Then he promised that he would return and completely reimburse the innkeeper for any additional expenses that he incurred while caring for this man. He left money to take care of the guy's needs and he put no limit on how much he would spend to see that the guy was taken care of and okay. If we are going to care, we've got to accept as fact that it is always going to cost us something.

Finally,

5. Caring shows our own love for God

When Jesus finished telling his story, he asked the lawyer one more question in verse 36—he asked him which of the three was most like a neighbor to the victim. Notice that the lawyer couldn't even bring himself to say the word "Samaritan" - instead he says "the one who had mercy on him." Notice, too, the lawyer is left without any excuses. The original question was, "Who is my neighbor?" and Jesus turned it to "What kind of neighbor are you?"

Jesus said essentially, "YOU are the neighbor who's supposed to love others. Everyone who has a need is your neighbor." Then Jesus said, "Go and do the same thing."

In 1 John 3 is one of the most convicting passages in the Bible when it comes to caring. It says this: *"This is how we've come to understand and experience love: Christ sacrificed his life for us. This is why we ought to live sacrificially for our fellow believers, and not just be out for ourselves. If you see some brother or sister in need and have the means to do something about it but turn a cold shoulder and do nothing, what happens to God's love? It disappears. And you made it disappear. My dear children, let's not just talk about love; let's practice real love."* (1 John 3:16-18, the message)

Caring shows our own love for God. Conversely, not caring shows something, too. *Religious* people will do what the Priest and the Levite did—they'll walk to the other side and avoid the guy. They'll keep walking. But not Christians. We won't be that way. We will be people who care just because people need it. It'll be passionate and active, and even though it will always cost us something, we'll care and act on it because it shows how much we love God.

pray