

Not Me

John 13:31-35

Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

What if you had lived in Jerusalem when Jesus was crucified? Would you have been part of the crowd, demanding that Pilate turn him over to be executed? Or would you have been different? What about if you had lived in Nazi Germany? Would you have turned in your neighbors for harboring Jews, or would you have been the one hiding them yourself? It's hard to honestly put ourselves in those situations, because there are so many variables at play. It's just not a hypothetical situation we can easily get our heads around.

But what if you had to take a trip into Chicago this week. As you walked around, if you saw a man lying face down on the sidewalk, what would you do? Before you answer, let me tell you about something that happened this week in New York City. Early in the morning, around 6:00 a.m., a man and woman got into a fight on the sidewalk. When the fight became physical, a Good Samaritan named Hugo stepped in to help the woman.

Then things turned ugly. The man stabbed Hugo, then he and the woman ran off, each in a different direction. The injured man stumbled a few feet, then collapsed flat on his face on the sidewalk. This whole scene unfolded in full view of a security camera. But what happened next was the most surprising. In the next hour, several people walked by Hugo, but no one did anything to help him. Some merely glanced at his body, but a few stopped. One even took a picture with a camera phone, but didn't then use that phone to call for help. By the time police arrived, Hugo had died.

Why didn't anyone stop to help? Psychologists say it's because of something called the Bystander Effect. It turns out, when someone is hurt or there is some sort of emergency, we are more likely to act if there are fewer witnesses. The more people present, the less likely we are to help. I remember when I took CPR training. We were taught to ask someone to call 911 while we did CPR. But the teacher specifically said not to say, "Someone call 911." Instead, pick a specific person. "You in the blue shirt; please call 911." Because if you don't single someone out, no one will call.

What's going on here? It turns out that when we gather as a group, humans act differently than we do as individuals. And in an emergency, we all assume that someone else is going to handle things. We wait for someone with more experience or authority to take charge.

The study of human dynamics tells us that authority has a great ability to influence how we act. A famous study done in 1974 showed that an overwhelming majority of people were willing to do something they thought was wrong, simply because someone with authority told them it was okay. Many of you may be familiar with Stanley Milgram's experiment.

In this experiment, a scientist explained that two people were going to take part in an experiment about the effect of punishment on learning. Both people were given a sample electric shock of just 45-volts. Then one person was strapped to the shock-giving machine, while the other person was led to an adjacent room. The person who was led away had the task of asking questions, and when given an incorrect response, administering an electric shock to the other person. The questioner did not know that the other person was in on the experiment, and was not actually being shocked. Instead, this person was an actor, speaking, yelling, and crying out as if they had been shocked.

Every time the student got an incorrect answer, the teacher was to increase the voltage of the shock by 15 volts. Their machine was clearly labeled with “slight shock,” “extreme danger,” and even simply “XXX.”

Prior to the experiment, Milgram estimated that about 4% of people would continue giving shocks up to 300 volts, and only one in 1000 would give the highest shock on the board. The results, however, were drastically different. Many of the teachers expressed concern about continuing, but the scientist prodded them to continue, telling them to go on, or that it was required to continue, or that they had no choice but to continue. The scientist also assured them that any responsibility would fall on the experimenter, not the volunteers. With this voice of an authority figure encouraging them, instead of only 4% reaching the 300 volt level, 100% of participants reached that level. And a startling 65% continued until they had given the last, lethal shock.

After the experiment, the scientists explained to the volunteers what had actually happened. Many of them were visibly relieved to discover no one was hurt. One man cried to discover that the student was alive, because he thought he had killed him. After the final analysis of all test subjects, Milgram had this to say about his experiment.

“Stark authority was pitted against the subjects' strongest moral imperatives against hurting others, and, with the subjects' ears ringing with the screams of the victims, authority won more often than not.” Why were those who challenged authority in the minority? It seems that obedience to authority is so deeply entrenched that it may override our values and personal codes of conduct.

But sometimes, it doesn't take an authority figure to get us to do what we know is wrong. Sometimes all it takes is being outside of the majority. Another experiment gathered a group of

about a half dozen people. They were asked to complete some basic paperwork, but while they were working, smoke appeared in the crack under a door. Again, this experiment was conducted largely with actors. Only one person in the crowd was the real volunteer; the rest were all told to ignore the smoke.

When a volunteer was in the room alone, as they noticed the smoke, they quickly left, presumably seeking safety. When the volunteer was in the room with the actors, they often looked up and seemed confused, but when no one else left, they stayed as well. In fact, 90% of the volunteers stayed in the smoke-filled room if the actors were there too.

Psychologist Dr. Shermer analyzed a recent re-creation of this experiment, and he says, “We are a social species that feels right and good about following our social group. It’s painful to stand up and be a revolter against the group. Most of us don’t do that. Even with smoke pouring in. And normally, you’re going to get the right cues from your social group. Normally the group would probably have done something.”

As Christians, we are called to love one another. Jesus says this morning that people will know we are his disciples if we have love for one another. Of course, Jesus also told us we are to love our enemies. But how can we do that when we seem to be hard-wired to mess things up? Maybe Jesus didn’t know about the Bystander Effect, the entrenched power of authority, or our social need to conform.

But maybe it can help us to remember a few important things. First, we are not bystanders in the world. Time and time again, Jesus calls his followers to get involved. To get their hands dirty by reaching out to help people. On the Today Show this week, as they talked about the story of the stabbing in New York, they repeatedly referred to Hugo as a Good Samaritan. Ironically, Jesus originally told the story of the Good Samaritan to convince people

not to walk away from someone in need, but to reach out. Even if it meant crossing normal social boundaries. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, was known to say, “Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can.” We are not bystanders. We are God’s active co-creators of the world, and what we do or don’t do makes a difference.

Second, we need to remember who is the source of our true authority. There are all kinds of authoritative voices in our lives. Children listen to parents and teachers; adults listen to their boss and to the government. But as Christians, we also listen to God’s authority. And we claim God’s authority as supreme. Which means that if there is a conflict between God’s voice and some other voice in our lives, we should choose God’s voice. A few years back when those WWJD bracelets were so popular? People were asking themselves, “What would Jesus do?” We can’t always claim to know the answer to that. But sometimes we do know, and even when it’s difficult, that’s the way we should choose.

Finally, as we think about conformity, remember those words of wisdom from someone in your past. “If all your friends jumped off the Brooklyn Bridge, would you follow them?” In our heads, we know darn well that we need to be careful about who we follow. But it’s easy to get swept up in the crowd. You know, 50 years ago, conforming to society as a whole meant joining a church. Today, it often means avoiding the church. But what if instead of conforming to all of society, we just tried to conform to Jesus? In Romans, Paul says, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

They will know we are Christians by our love. And they probably won’t take the Bystander Effect as an excuse. So let us love one another extravagantly. Amen and amen.