

*Newsweek* magazine just carried an editorial from a young doctor who witnessed a car accident. Leaping from his own vehicle, the doctor ran to the injured motorist, a drunk driver, and opened his blocked windpipe to save the man's life. When he reported it to some colleagues, unanimously they scolded him. By assisting a stranger without any approval, he left himself wide open for a lawsuit which could end his new career and endanger the financial stability of his entire family. In the end the doctor concludes if it ever happens again, he will pass by; he won't stop. Helping people isn't worth the risk of a lawsuit.

Letters to the editor poured in. People said doctors should save lives. Others asserted that "Good Samaritan statutes" protect people in every state. One lawyer promised that if this doctor were ever sued for helping a stranger, the lawyer would donate time to defend him.

The dilemma of this young doctor is all too real. Perhaps the priest and the levite in Jesus' parable could offer similar concerns. Who of us has not passed by a beggar or a hitchhiker because we feared bodily harm or robbery? It's not that we don't love the hitchhiker; it's that we love our family more--we have other responsibilities, and the dangers of stopping make us weigh which love to choose.

Jesus could expand this parable today. In our culture people fear litigation as well as robbery or physical harm. The excuses for not helping have multiplied.

We could debate the pros and cons of helping a stranger when risk seems high. I doubt we'd ever resolve it. For sure, though, we'd miss the most obvious teaching of Jesus' story. The Good Samaritan does not simply concern what to do in an emergency. It concerns daily life, non-emergencies. It teaches the second great commandment, to love our neighbor. It's about kindness to strangers--at the grocery, at work, in the parking lot, or in the pew. Its message is not hard to figure out and tolerates no debate: Given the opportunity to love, choose love.