20 November 2011 | voaspecialenglish.com

What It Means to Be a Good Samaritan

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STEVE EMBER: Welcome to THIS IS AMERICA in VOA Special English. I'm Steve Ember.

FAITH LAPIDUS: And I'm Faith Lapidus. Someone who stops to help a stranger is known as a good Samaritan. This week on our program, we talk about good Samaritans and what laws and science say about them.

(MUSIC)

STEVE EMBER: The term "good Samaritan" comes from a story in the Christian bible. We asked a local minister here in Washington to tell us the story.

AARON GRAHAM: "I'm Aaron Graham, lead pastor of the District Church in Washington, DC."

He says in the Gospel of Luke, a legal expert asks Jesus what it means to love your neighbor.

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More than 1,000 students at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, learning basic CPR

AARON GRAHAM: "Rather than Jesus giving him a lecture in who his neighbor is, he actually tells a story about a Jewish guy who's on his way up to Jericho from Jerusalem who gets beat up and robbed."

The injured man is lying by the side of the road. Two people walk by. They do not stop to help him. In fact, they walk on the other side of the road to avoid him. Finally, someone from Samaria -- a Samaritan -- comes along.

AARON GRAHAM: "The Samaritan cares for this Jewish guy, he bandages his wounds, he takes him to the inn, and then he even foots the bill for him."

Reverend Graham points out that the Samaritans and the Jews were enemies at that time. But that did not stop the "Good Samaritan" from helping the injured man.

This idea of helping anyone who needs help is common among cultures and religions.

AARON GRAHAM: "This is a familiar story even beyond the Christian community. One of the things that unites many faiths is this call to love our neighbor. "

FAITH LAPIDUS: Helping others may be a religious duty. But some current research suggests that humans may also have a biological urge, an impulse, to help each other.

Robert Sussman and Robert Cloninger are professors at Washington University in St. Louis, in Missouri. They worked together on a new book about working together. The book is called "Origins of Altruism and Cooperation." It brings together work by researchers who study crime, brains, genes, history and other subjects.

Bob Sussman is an anthropologist. Robert Cloninger is a professor of psychiatry in the School of Medicine. Dr. Cloninger says social animals, including humans, need to cooperate to survive.

ROBERT CLONINGER: "The need to be a social animal was probably a response to people not being safe just living -- functioning in a solitary way. If they're out in the open field in the bright sunlight they're easily spotted, but in groups they're safer."

ROBERT SUSSMAN: "We think cooperation is the core of social living animals, whereas most people who talk about cooperation think it’s a by-product of competition."

In other words, in their view, humans first had to learn to cooperate in order to live in groups. Dr. Cloninger suggests that, as a result, people became more intelligent.

This intelligence, he says, helped early people act in a way that was good not just for themselves but also for other people.

STEVE EMBER: The desire to help others can take many forms, including charitable giving.

Aaron Graham told us what his church did on September eleventh to mark the tenth anniversary of the terrorist attacks on the United States. Most of the members are young people seeking experience by working for free in Washington. That Sunday they collected money to help people suffering from the famine in parts of Somalia.

AARON GRAHAM: "I was hoping we could raise a couple thousand dollars. But people gave so generously. They gave fifteen thousand dollars on that Sunday morning."

Charitable giving in the United States last year totaled about two hundred ninety billion dollars. That was up from two hundred eighty billion the year before. Contributions dropped in two thousand nine and two thousand eight as a result of the Great Recession.

(MUSIC)

FAITH LAPIDUS: Giving money to a charity could be seen as one way of choosing to be a good Samaritan. But some American states have laws that require people to help in certain situations.

John Mikhail is a law professor at Georgetown University in Washington. He says there are two kinds of so-called good Samaritan laws. These are different from rules requiring teachers, for example, to report child abuse.

One type of good Samaritan law establishes a duty to rescue. This kind of law says people must rescue a stranger who needs help, if it is easy to do so. For instance, a person might have a duty to call out to someone who is about to step into the street and get hit by a car.

Professor Mikhail says the punishment for failing to rescue might be a fine or perhaps jail time. But few states have such laws, he says, pointing out that this kind of law raises questions.

JOHN MIKHAIL: "How much aid are you supposed to render someone who's in need? Why doesn't that apply to the easy case of sending fifty dollars to Oxfam to save a life around the world, or at least someone here at home who's starving and who could easily have harm prevented by your small effort?"

The second type of good Samaritan law protects people who choose to help others.

JOHN MIKHAIL: "Imagine the situation of a doctor on an airplane, or someone calls for a doctor. One type of law that's been pretty sensibly passed is a law that would protect the doctor who offers help in that kind of situation from lawsuits, unless they are grossly negligent."

All fifty states have some kind of law that protects good Samaritans in a medical emergency. In July, New York became the latest state to pass a law protecting people who call for help when someone has a drug overdose.

In these cases, the witnesses may not want to call emergency services because they are afraid of getting arrested for having drugs. But New York and a few other states have decided that people who act as good Samaritans in these situations should not have to worry about getting arrested.

STEVE EMBER: Professor Mikhail says good Samaritan laws protect the intuition, the natural sense, that people have to help others in need.

JOHN MIKHAIL: "Couple interesting points about this. One is that the intuition is shared even by young children. And the second is that the intuition is shared across the world."

And he should know. John Mikhail is the author of a new book called "Elements of Moral Cognition." It describes experiments in which he and his colleagues asked people about situations where someone needed help. Professor Mikhail says everyone, no matter what country they were from, expressed a willingness to intervene.

Yet last month there was the story of a two-year-old girl in southern China who was hit by a truck at a street market. Security cameras showed that for seven minutes, no one stopped to help. Then another truck hit her. Finally, a stranger pulled the child to the side of the road. Wang Yue died in a hospital more than a week later.

Her tragic story led to debate and discussion in China and elsewhere about what it means to be a good Samaritan.

Similar questions followed a recent case involving a murder in the United States. One woman killed another after business hours at a Lululemon Athletica store in Bethesda, Maryland, where they both worked. During the trial, the manager of a neighboring Apple store admitted that she and another employee heard the

attack but took no action. “What’s scarier? The slaying, or the bystanders who heard and did nothing?” read one headline in a column in the Washington Post.

FAITH LAPIDUS: So why don't people always help? Social scientists have spent years studying what they call the bystander effect. This involves the social influences that make groups of people less likely to help as they witness a troubling situation.

But Robert Cloninger, the psychiatrist, says that among individuals, there are many reasons why people may decide not to act. They might feel afraid they are going to get hurt themselves. They might have had bad experiences in the past. Or they might not get pleasure out of being kind to others.

ROBERT CLONINGER: "If someone is repeatedly abused and neglected, they may form abnormal connections with what's rewarding. Some anti-social people actually become sadistic because of these traumatic past experiences. But that's an abnormal state of the brain."

Robert Sussman, the anthropologist, studies apes and other non-human primates as well as humans. He says there is another reason people might not help.

ROBERT SUSSMAN: "Humans have this thing when they think they're going to be sued. Many of the primates who live in social groups will automatically help in those situations, because they don't have all of these things that they've learned that they could be punished for doing that."

So what is the solution if fear of getting sued might stop someone from helping? Some activists call for more good Samaritan laws to protect people from lawsuits. But Sheldon Richman has another suggestion. Mr. Richman edits a journal, The Freeman: Ideas on Liberty, that teaches the principles of the free market. He says the solution is to change the system of civil law to not make it so easy to sue other people.

STEVE EMBER: Kristin Schroeder says she did not think about laws or lawsuits the day a woman collapsed at work.

KRISTIN SCHROEDER: "The ideas of laws just don't even go through my head in a situation like that. What's going through my head is, I want to help this person."

The woman was in her mid-twenties. She had suffered cardiac arrest -- her heart had suddenly stopped beating.

Ms. Schroeder did CPR, cardiopulmonary resuscitation, to keep blood moving through the woman's body until emergency help came. The woman survived, thanks to the CPR.

Kristin Schroeder says she thinks laws that protect good Samaritans make sense. But more important, she says, is education.

KRISTIN SCHROEDER: "You can't fault someone for trying to help. It would be great to educate people with CPR in masses, so that people feel more confident to act."

Those who might like to be good Samaritans should know that new guidelines say bystanders should use the "hands-only" method of CPR. Hands-only CPR means chest compressions without mouth-to-mouth breathing. To watch a demonstration, go to voaspecialenglish.com for a link to an American Heart Association video.

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FAITH LAPIDUS: Our program was written by Kelly Nuxoll and produced by Brianna Blake. I'm Faith Lapidus.

STEVE EMBER: And I'm Steve Ember. You can find transcripts, MP3s and podcasts of our programs at voaspecialenglish.com. Join us again next week for THIS IS AMERICA in VOA Special English.

Correction: An earlier version of this story misidentified Washington University as the University of Washington in St. Louis.