

Go, and Do Likewise

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Luke 10:25-37

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“There’s this guy...” Jesus begins, “going down from Jerusalem to Jericho...” Everyone in His day knew that was an ill-policed, high-crime road which dropped about 3600 feet in about twenty miles. Caves, switchbacks, hidden corners and lairs. On that road today stands a building called the Inn of the Good Samaritan. On one tour group, one of the pilgrims was knowledgeable enough and brave enough to observe to the tour guide: “Jesus was telling a story; there was no good Samaritan. So there was no Good Samaritan Inn.” The tour guide thought a few moments and responded, “Well, if there had been, I’m sure this is exactly where it would have been.”

Jesus was telling a story, a parable. But it didn’t come out of thin air. As we heard, it came as His response to an adversary trying to get the best of Jesus. (Didn’t happen.) Any honest questions or doubts about Jesus or addressed in prayer to Jesus are healthy and welcome, but this scribe (or lawyer of the Scriptures) wasn’t interested in Jesus’ answer; he was trying to make himself look good by showing off how much he knew. He was the expert debater who’d been through graduate school; he’d asked Jesus what is the key to eternal life—quite a question—a key question to any religion or philosophy

Jesus doesn’t debate him, but simply asks him to go back to basics: “What does the Law say?” “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind...and your neighbor as yourself.” “Do this, and you will live,” Jesus tells him. He wanted a theological debate; Jesus asked him if he knew his ABC’s. That’s a little embarrassing for the scribe.

The scribe should have quit while he was ahead. (You’ve had that feeling: Jesus, or today His Holy Spirit, has made it perfectly simple, perfectly clear what you are to do. But we want to debate, we want to negotiate, we want to ignore Him—we want to oppose and disobey and do what we want to. We come out ahead when we do what the Spirit instructs us to do. Pretty simple.) The scribe is playing this game: if he has to love his neighbor, there must at least be some wiggle room as to who constitutes his neighbor. Surely he can work Jesus up to a good debate on this one: “Exactly who is my neighbor? Exactly who do I have to love?”

In response we hear Jesus’ parable, and it’s always interesting to try to find ourselves in the parable. With

whom do you identify?

The thieves have done their violent work before we ever meet their victim. The innocent traveler was simply walking down the road; they set upon him and take everything he has including his clothes; they work him over so badly they think he might be dead. Fortunately, I think it’s hard for us to picture ourselves as these robbers in the parable. Thank God. (Matthew Henry, the famous 17th Century Bible commentator, was robbed one day and entered in his diary that evening: “Let me be thankful—first, because I was never robbed before; second, because although they took my wallet they did not take my life; third, because although they took my all, it was not much, and fourth, because it was I who was robbed, not I who robbed.”)

Next come along the two “good guys,” or at least the ones who are supposed to be the “good guys.” The pastor and the social worker. The green activist and young woman waiting tables to pay for her college. You get the idea. As Jesus tells it they happen to be priests in Jerusalem, a priest and a Levite, and you heard how they disappoint: they saw this poor man beaten and battered, and detoured over to the other side of the road. Probably picked up their pace quite a bit, too.

Jesus does not elaborate on their motives, but we can all identify with them. Maybe the robbers are still nearby, waiting for their next mark. Maybe the beaten man is one of them, bait in a savage trap. Maybe the beaten man is already dead, and if so, the priest couldn’t touch him anyway or he would be made “unclean” and would have to stay away from the Temple for a week. Maybe he couldn’t afford to be furloughed, or he just loved his work. And what good would he be to his wife and kids if he tried to play the hero only to get himself killed and leave them orphaned? Maybe he was running behind schedule and didn’t want to be any more late than he already was. Maybe the sight of blood makes him squeamish.

Sometimes it’s best to use your common sense, and not get involved—use your cell phone to call the police rather than get out to try to help someone change a flat tire at midnight in the wrong part of downtown Los Angeles... but what if my common sense tells me to hurry around everyone different from me, everyone in need? What if I’m always too busy? Who is my neighbor?

What is the Holy Spirit telling you?

(Be assured pastors find ourselves in the parable in these two “good guys,” also. Virtually every seminary student is familiar with the experiment the professor of Homiletics/Preaching conducted pertaining to this very parable. Each preaching student had been assigned to preach on the Good Samaritan, and each had to go from a particular classroom to the chapel, one by one, in order to do so. Some were given three minutes, some ten. In advance, the professor had stationed someone on the ground en route to play the part of a homeless person in obvious distress. You guessed it: most of those going to preach on the Good Samaritan failed to be the good Samaritan, failed to engage the one in need right in their path—and those in the bigger hurry were even less likely to stop.)

We do not live in Jesus’ day; it is almost inevitable that we keep our distance from those in need. We live in an era of “the global village” and instant worldwide communication; we have been taught that everyone is our neighbor: the earthquake victim in Haiti and the soccer fan from Ghana and the factory worker in China and the Mexican immigrant with no papers. It seems like everybody can be my neighbor except the person next door; everybody qualifies as neighbor if I don’t know what that term really means. (I’m sorry to say I don’t even know the names of the people who live two or three doors down from us, in any direction. Do you know your neighbors? I know one family owns a boat because we occasionally see it in tow on the street, and I know one has three boys who skateboard a lot. But mostly during the day nobody’s home, and the doors are probably all locked anyway. Things have changed; this is 2010; the kids don’t cut through anybody’s back yard for a short cut; we don’t sit out rocking on the porch keeping an eye on everybody and gossiping about the rest, we don’t see everybody’s clothes and even unmentionables flapping in the breeze to dry on the clotheslines in the backyard, and we never see the kids out playing, making up their own games in the park. When I don’t know my actual neighbors, it’s easy to hear a parable like this and generalize it into a summons to universal benevolence; sort of a call to give alms to the United Way—or at least to set up an agency so someone will help.

But Jesus is talking about personal contact and personal response, which is why the scribe wanted a formula from Him: “Who is my neighbor? Who do I have to go out of my way for?”

Jesus wouldn’t cooperate. No formula. As long as my intention is to play it safe, study and discuss these niceties in Bible Study (or in my case preach about them), avoid involvement or “pass by on the other side,” hoping

somebody else will do something, I’m afraid I have too much in common with the priest and the Levite. When I will not consult the Holy Spirit, and obey, I know I have.

Next, along comes the punch line to the parable. Along comes the most unlikely hero (well, the semi-hero anyway)—the Samaritan. Most of you know the Samaritans were despised by the Jews, and vice versa, in this era. For centuries they had not gotten along; the Samaritans in the north intermarried with outsiders when the Jews in the south did not; the Samaritans tried to prevent the Jews from rebuilding Jerusalem when some returned after the Babylonian Exile. The Samaritan walking along this road today would be the child sex-offender, the drug cartel kingpin, the corrupt government official selling favors and getting wealthy at the expense of the people, or the corporate leader selling out for profit. Not likely heroes.

Jesus explains how he differs from the first two on that road to Jericho. He sees the beaten man and instead of taking the long way around he goes toward him. He is “moved with pity”—his heart goes out to this man. One human being feeling with and for another; face to face, touch to touch: “I see you.” He goes to the beaten man; he touches him, he dresses his wounds, he puts him on his own donkey while he walks; he probably has to prop up the man, holding him on the animal. Maybe he gives him a clean robe. He takes him to the inn [alas, not the Good Samaritan Inn] and offers his credit card to the innkeeper for him to keep and nurse the man to health. None of this can be done by “remote,” or through a third party. The Samaritan is there with him. He is in a position to be his neighbor, and he responds.

Jesus tells it so that this Samaritan is a modest hero—maybe semi-heroic. (Maybe even you and I could be semi-heroic...) He does not interrupt his trip or quit his job to take the helpless man back into his own home to tend him in person. He does not perform surgery or obligate himself financially for the rest of his life. Because he feels for the man, he does the things he is capable of doing. (You never know what might happen when we do generous things we are capable of. Remember the husband who decided to begin to treat his wife with new affection and respect. On the way home from work the first day he stopped to pick up a dozen roses, and when he arrived home he rang the doorbell and stood there grinning as she opened the front door. She took one look at him, eyes flashing, and said, “Suzy got sick and I had to come back from work to pick her up, the washing machine broke down and leaked all down the hallway into the kitchen, Johnny got in trouble at school and now you come home drunk!”)

(It goes without saying the Samaritan can help because

he owns a donkey and he has financial resources to offer. He offers the beaten man his own time, his healing touch, his personal care, his own money. This would become a different parable if he offered to pay for the man's care with money he needed to go take from someone else, or if he needed to seize someone else's donkey to offer the man a ride. Perhaps a valuable parable, but not this one.)

Jesus turns this into quite an upbeat parable: you and I can be the Samaritan, the ones who turn out to be the "good guy." This is Jesus' way of changing the world. Humans seem to like big budgets, big projects, big agencies, big publicity. Jesus seems to trust in a lot of us "semi-heroes" doing the "semi-heroic" things we can do from one moment to the next: we never know who or what we'll come upon. (Jesus knows we can each one of us make a difference for God: in spite of not knowing much about how to be neighbors in 2010 when we all commute to work in different places and nobody's ever home; in spite of our knack for being forever in a hurry and not seeing or not slowing down to draw near and come close to others.)

To tell the truth, I'm still not sure I am as wise as a serpent in the ways I try to "have my heart go out to" those people in need I see. As you can imagine, from time to time homeless people stop by the church. Some want prayers; some are hungry. Some are drunk or high. Many ask for money. The first thing I try to do is to imagine that each one might be Jesus. It doesn't cost me anything to be respectful; to invite people into my study to sit down. I always have water available, and if appropriate, I have some healthy food on hand for this purpose (usually, bags of Trader Joe's almonds: nutritious, portable, and compact.) I listen very hard, because I need to decide what God wants me to do. I'm listening politely to their story and trying to listen to the Spirit at the same time. As you know, for some people it comes as a rare gift simply to be taken seriously and listened to—to be treated as a woman or man lovingly created by God in the image of God. Usually I do not give money to people asking for it, because I'm not confident the money will be used for any healthy purpose, though I offer to direct them to an agency where they might be able to begin get what they need. (Most of the time after I have given money I get the feeling I have been ripped off, and have further trained someone not to be truthful or to accept responsibility. Not one person in the past decade who has promised to repay me has ever done so—and believe me, I would remember something like this.) On the other hand, when I wander out of Corona del Mar, zoned for gentility, and into Los Angeles or San Francisco or New York, I can't say I go out of my way to be a very good neighbor to the homeless. Jesus gives us no formula; we are meant to

struggle and to pray and to obey. What is the Holy Spirit telling you at the moment?

God knows you don't live in Haiti or Ghana or China or Washington DC: but you live somewhere. You don't have every skill and talent—but you have some. (The Samaritan was not a medical doctor and he did not own a hotel—but he saw the hurting man in front of him on that road on that day and he was moved and he came to him and he freely offered the gifts he had. The Samaritan was flexible in schedule and temperament. So we can be.)

Jesus knows that every day, every encounter we come upon can be decisive; all of us ordinary people making ordinary decisions to obey the Spirit every moment are the ones who change the world.

Ordinary people being semi-heroic to another where they are and with what they have can make a big difference. One of the most influential theologians of the 20th Century, recently retired from the University of Tübingen, is Jürgen Moltmann—a wonderful human being best known for his theology of hope. This is a happy irony, given that Moltmann grew up in Germany during the Hitler era having nothing to do with the Church, and soon enough having no shred of hope. Moltmann entered the German Army in 1944 at the age of 19. When the war ended he was taken as a prisoner of war to the Norton Camp in England where there was little but horror. Virtually every German city was in ruins; 12 million starving refugees flooded out from Prussia and Silesia. He describes being "face to face with nothing," not knowing where to go or where to turn. Moltmann had escaped the war with his life, but all was lost. There was no source of hope for him or his comrades. Hearts and psyches and lives were broken, friends were dead, families had been destroyed.

Moltmann describes the two ways hope began slowly to enter into his heart again. He was offered a Bible by a chaplain in a Scottish labor camp. He would have preferred cigarettes, he says, but he got a Bible. Having no faith or belief in anything, he read it without comprehension, without hope—until he read Jesus' cry on the cross: "My God, My God: why have You forsaken me?" He believed at that moment that this Jesus—this fellow sufferer and Redeemer from guilt—might be One who could possibly understand him and his countrymen.

Moltmann also describes simple kindnesses from Christ's people toward him. He tells how the simple hospitality of miners and their families in Kilmarnock shamed him deeply: these former enemies who invited him and other POWs into their homes; he, as their guest, was reproached for no sin and reminded of no guilt. He wore his prisoner's clothes and number to their dinner

table, and for Christ's sake he was received as a brother. Moltmann also writes of the time he was marching along with other German prisoners through the Scottish countryside in winter. Their file came to a halt; his nose was running and he hadn't even a scrap of Kleenex. One of the Scots women offered him a small hankie—a simple kindness he never forgot.

Later, in 1947, he and a few other POWs were invited to a Christian student Conference in Swanwick. They arrived in their wartime uniforms, fearing how they might be received. What would he say about the German war crimes? But Moltmann describes the forgiveness extended in Christ; from also the Dutch students who told of the terror of the Gestapo; the loss of their Jewish friends; the destruction of their homes and towns by the dreaded Germans. Apart from the love of God in Christ, they told him, they could never be talking with these German soldiers. That was an hour of liberation for him—Moltmann says that finally after that conference he “was able to breathe again...and returned cheerfully to the camp behind the barbed wire. The question of how long the captivity would last no longer bothered [him].” Jurgen Moltmann finally returned to Germany to prepare for a life of service to Christ as a new man, who would in turn influence tens of thousands of seminarians and pastors—all because some simple Scottish people and some students from around the world offered him love and acceptance. They saw him; they came close to him; for Jesus' sake they freely offered him what little they could. They were at least semi-heroic.

As a result of their personal and undeserved kindnesses toward him, Moltmann discovered the most important thing about this parable. He discovered he was that man whom life had worked over and left in the ditch for dead. At the same time he discovered there is One who has become Neighbor to us all; who has not remained far away, has not left us to our sorry fate.

Sooner or later every last one of us becomes the unnamed victim in the parable—beaten and helpless and vulnerable. It may be that the consequences of our secret crimes, large or small, keep compounding until our shame and guilt weigh us down in a private hell beyond exit. It may be that the day comes when our grown children finally have to come and take the car keys away from us and pack us away in some kind of a “home”; it may be that the twilight of Alzheimers falls over us until in total darkness we forget the names and faces of those even most dear to us. The shadows of the world will lengthen and the noises of the world be hushed; the evening will come.

Sooner or later, gradually or suddenly, the great robber,

Death, is going to assault us all. And there will be Jesus. There is Jesus: the One who faced Death on the cross and freely submitted Himself to it so that He could come to you and be with you when Death comes to rob you of your life. There is Jesus: the One who spent all his time showing the love of God to those overcome by shame and guilt—the One who has come back from hell to keep pursuing and finding and moving toward even the dreaded Gestapo agents, and you, and me. He knows everything about you and me, and still He reaches out to us.

We know that He has seen us and known us, all the way down... and still He comes near to us to heal us and restore us and love us. We know that we continue to become more and more like Him as we, too, become a good neighbor to others. Go and do likewise.

Luke 10:25-37

25 Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

26 He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?”

27 He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.”

28 And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

29 But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

30 Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead.

31 Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.

32 So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

33 But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity.

34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him.

35 The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’

36 Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?”

37 He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”