



From the Pulpit: July 10, 2022

Silvi Pirn's Retirement Blessing

The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

Luke 10:25–37

To Bless the Space Between Us, III: Thresholds

This summer at Kenilworth Union Church we're following the ministry of Jesus as told to us according to the Gospel of Luke chapter 10. The Parable of the Good Samaritan.

An expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and took off, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came upon him, and when he saw him he was moved with compassion. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, treating them with oil and wine. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. 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.' Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

Jesus' story is miniscule, exactly 191 words, or the length of a Tik Tok video or an Instagram reel. Plus it never happened. Jesus made it up. And yet it may have made the most impact on the most people in the most places in the most ways over the most number of centuries than anything else that's ever been written down.

"Jesus roundhouses the whole institution of religion straight on the jaw."

And so there are Good Samaritan Hospitals. There are Good Samaritan soup kitchens and food pantries and homeless shelters. There are Good Samaritan colleges. There are Samaritan Counseling Centers. There are even Good Samaritan Laws to protect the helpers.

A man traveling the Jericho Road is mugged and left for dead. It was his own pathetic fault. He shouldn't have been out there alone. The Jericho Road was notorious for brigands, hooligans, and carjackers, or whatever passed for carjackers in first-century Palestine.

And then Jesus roundhouses the whole institution of religion straight on the jaw. "Along comes a priest," he says. We get his point. We know priests. Katie and Christine and I are priests. Priests preach the word, celebrate the Eucharist, baptize the babies, marry the lovers, and bury the dead. They're supposed to be devout and pious and holy and sympathetic.

But the priest is going somewhere important and can't be bothered and passes by on the other side.

But Jesus is not done smacking religion. "Along comes a Levite," he says. Levites, so named because they were the descendants of Jacob's third son Levi, were **not** priests but **almost**. They helped the priests at the Temple, or in our case at the Church. So John Sharp is Levite. Lisa Bond is a Levite. Anybody who works for the Church but doesn't preach the word or baptize the babies is a Levite. They were supposed to be holy too. Fortunately for us, John and Lisa are. But this Levite is not like Lisa and John and crosses the street just like the priest.

But as we all know, good stories have three parts, and Jesus says, "Along comes.... Along comes.... Along comes...you fill in the blank with whomever you like the least. Along comes a Proud Boy. Along comes a gang member. Along comes an opioid pusher. Along comes a drunk.

This guy whom nobody likes becomes the hero of Jesus' dangerous little story. He dresses the guy's wounds, piles him into the back seat of his BMW, drops him off at the nearest hotel, buys him a room, and leaves his credit card with the desk clerk so that the guy will be taken care of till he's recovered.

So Jesus' dangerous little story vastly maximizes my definition of 'neighbor' to include the other, the different, the misunderstood, even the despised. It also rearranges our priorities. There is nothing

more important than the guy in the ditch. Not the appointment you have to keep or the speech you have to give or the sermon you have to preach or the paper you have to write or the job you can't be late for.

You remember the spectacular mid-century modern where Cameron crashes his father's beloved 1961 Ferrari through the floor-to-ceiling window in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*? That's in Highland Park. Has that house become a sacred shrine for worshipful pilgrims like the *Home Alone* House in Winnetka? I don't know.

Weird Science, *Sixteen Candles*, and *Risky Business* were also filmed there. The *Risky Business* producer says, "It's all about white boys off the lake." There wasn't a murder in Highland Park for 21 years—from 2000 to 2020.

And now the violence we thought was far off has come near. To a middle-class high school like Columbine, or a fairy tale New England village like Newtown or an historic AME Church in Charleston, or a Hispanic town like Uvalde. Nearly every day, Doogie and I walk to Nick Corwin Park a block from home. Nick died in 1988. He was eight years old. Many of us knew and loved Nancy

and Richard Langert. Nancy and Richard died in 1990. It happened in Winnetka before it happened anywhere else.

There is nothing redeemable about that unthinkable trauma, and I have no wise words for you.

"Jesus' dangerous little story vastly maximizes my definition of 'neighbor' to include the other, the different, the misunderstood, even the despised. It also rearranges our priorities. There is nothing more important than the guy in the ditch."

But as I listen to Jesus' sacred if dangerous little story, I think of all the helpers in Highland Park. The police officers who identified that creep within minutes and located him within hours. The parents who stood between their children and 83 bullets. The Americans who donated \$3 million to a two-year-old orphan. The doctors who received the wounded. One E-Room doctor said, "It was a good day. I got to heal injuries and repair the broken."

There was nowhere to run, so a retired nurse named Karen Britten welcomed 30 of them into her home. Apparently, Karen knows that the person in the ditch is her priority. "There were all these parents with kids," she said, "so I just started grabbing them and hauling them inside." They were there for hours. She showed Disney movies for the kids and prepared food for everyone.

One young mother said, "She was absolutely our guardian angel who led us to safety." Others did the same thing. One protector said, "We didn't even know their names. When they arrived, they were strangers. When they left, they were friends."¹

Silvi, five years ago you gave a talk to the high school class of 2017 at the Allison Tobey Smart celebration. I was so moved I wrote it down and kept it all these years. You said,

"There was nowhere to run, so a retired nurse named Karen Britten welcomed 30 of them into her home. Apparently, Karen knows that the person in the ditch is her priority."

"all day and every day we are helping each other become who we will eventually be. Remember this: that each person you come into contact with, each person you speak to or comment about, each person you secretly judge, is someone that you are helping to their destination, good or bad. And when you think about who to surround yourselves with, choose the ones who are helping you to your destination."

You quoted C. S. Lewis: "There are no *ordinary* people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations—these are mortal, and they will one day be gone. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendors...Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses."²

Silvi, since you were practically a child, you always taught us that our neighbor is sacred. Taught us that the person in the ditch is our priority. You always said, if you are wounded, you are mine for

the healing period if you are broken, you are mine for the mending. If you are sad, you are mine for the listening. If you are lonely, you are mine for the friendship.

So thanks and thanks and ever thanks.

¹ Tom Polansek & Brendan O'Brien, "In Chicago Suburb, 'Guardian Angels' Sheltered Strangers Under Attack," Reuters, July 5, 2022. Some quotes slightly adapted for clarity.

² C. S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," *The Weight of Glory & Other Addresses* (New York: MacMillan, 1949), 17–19.

—Prayers of the People—
The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster

We dedicate these perfect summer days to you, Holy One,
in whom we live and move and have our being.

These blue sky days are alive with your presence. The shimmer of sunshine giving rise to the deep breath of peace. We need you on the green, in the field, on the lake shore. We need you as the fireflies settle across our yards.

We need you, Holy Wisdom. We need you, Redeemer. We need you, Fierce Protection.

For even on the most perfect summer days, the impossible can happen. Even amid joy, sorrow can unfold. We are still staggered, dazed, shaken up by the brute force and untamed rage that was unleashed in Highland Park on Independence Day. Our hearts are with those who died. Those who were wounded. Those whose lives were turned upside down in ways unimaginable.

We grieve. We remember. We question. We confess the impossibility of reconciling the joy of a parade alongside shock and sorrow of violence. Hold our prayers. Hold our questions. Hold our sorrow. Hold the hurt. Hold our dreams for a world without such hate. Hold our resolutions to work toward a kinder, more peaceful world.

Let us be an instrument of your love. Let us be an instrument of your peace. Let us be an instrument of possibility.

There is no other way. Guide us, O God. Blessed are you, O God, whose glory is hidden in the suffering of the cross. Blessed are you, O God, whose tears are poured out for the sorrow of the world. Blessed are you, O God, who longs for peace. As we pray “thy kingdom come” let us rest in you. Our father.... Amen.

**You may use these prayers for non-commercial purposes in any medium, provided you include a brief credit line with the author's name (if applicable) and a link to the original post.*