

Stopping Along the Way

Luke 10: 25-37

**First Presbyterian Church
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Have you ever experienced care from a Good Samaritan? I well remember my first road trip without any parents. Dan North and I were heading up the center of Florida, making our way from Miami to the Georgia Mountains. But just about five hours into the drive his car stopped. We were 17 and 19 years old. We knew how to put gas in the car and change a tire. But what do you do when your wheel just locks up? We stood by the car on the Florida Turnpike in the hot wilderness of pine trees and palmettos, feeling pretty helpless. No cell phones. Not even roadside phones. We prayed and we waited and we waved at passing cars. Before long, a guy in a beat up white van pulled over. He was a big guy. He was going to help us. Or kidnap us. Thankfully, he was a believer. We shared our joy in Christ together. He couldn't fix the wheel but he drove us to the next town and got us to a station who could do the work. We never saw him again, but felt sure he was our Good Samaritan. He didn't know us, he didn't have to help us, but he took mercy on two naïve and ignorant teenagers. We blessed God for his compassion. I've never forgotten this man I knew only as John. There are still some people left in the world who will help. I hope I can, from time to time, be one of them.

But is that it? Is that the essence of this parable? Just take more time to help more people. Now that's not a bad message. But can we tap into a deeper source? Can we find what would take me from guilt and obligation to an "I want to"?

The set up for the story is important. A lawyer came up to Jesus. Now that doesn't mean a lawyer like the ubiquitous Alexander Shunnarah on billboards all over Alabama! It means a Bible scholar. An expert in the law of the Old Testament. This scholar wanted to ask Jesus a question. But not because he was searching for an answer. He wanted to test whether Jesus really knew his stuff. "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" That's an important question. What makes for life? What makes me truly alive? What saves me from the nothingness of death? What rescues me from the horror of a bad judgment? How do I get saved? How do I inherit eternal life? The way you answer that question tells everything about who you believe God to be and what you believe about human responsibility.

Jesus answered that question with a question: “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” He showed that he was not intimidated by the scholar’s question. Nor was he afraid to hear any interpretation. Jesus was ready to engage over Scripture. So the scholar gave the correct and standard answer. “Love the Lord your God with all you heart, soul, mind and strength. Love your neighbor as yourself.” The lawyer said just what Jesus said to other people: these are the two greatest commandments. This *is* the way to life. Love God and love neighbor. Simple to grasp. Impossible to do. Now maybe Jesus, the upstart young rabbi from the north, needled the imminent scholar just a bit when he said, “You have answered correctly!” Sort of like saying to Stephen Hawking, “Yeah, your math looks pretty good here.”

But the scholar then revealed more of what he really wanted to know. He asked another question. “And who is my neighbor?” We totally get this question. He wanted to know how far his responsibility to other people has to extend. A neighbor meant a “near one,” someone you treat like family, someone you take care of as you would your very own dear ones. So what’s the range of people I’m responsible for? We get a little echo of Cain when we asked, “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

Jesus replied with a story. He spun a tale of very ordinary occurrence. A



man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho. A guy was on the Jericho road. It’s a 17 mile stretch that descends 3300 feet along a narrow, rocky, winding trail. The Jericho road runs down inside a gorge between the mountains. There is almost no vegetation on this road. And no place to stop. You had to do the 8 hour walking journey in one long, hard day. When you were finished, you ended up in the lowest city on earth, some 1000 feet below sea level!

A traveler on the Jericho Road was susceptible to bandits. There was just no place to flee. Travelling alone was not wise, and this traveler got attacked, beat up, robbed and left for dead. Unless help came, he was not going to make it.

The first two passersby went around him. When you see how narrow the Jericho Road is, you realize the irony in Jesus’ words. It’s not easy to go around a

body lying across a four foot road, with a wall of rock on one side and a gorge on the other. But the priest and the Levite both managed. Their response seems callous, but in their defense, contact with a dead person would have made them ritually unclean for several days. If they were hurrying to perform religious functions in Jerusalem, they couldn't afford such ritual impurity. We all have really good reasons for why we can't help in particular situations.

The one who does stop is a Samaritan. These folks were not well thought of by the Jews. After all, centuries earlier, when the Jews got exiled to Babylon, the Samaritans moved into their land. They intermarried with the few Jews left, and began a people with a hybrid religion. They were half-breeds who were more than half-wrong about God. And they weren't nice. Around the year of Jesus' birth, a group of Samaritans raided the Jewish Temple. They desecrated the Temple by scattering human bones all around it. They made the place of worship unusable and polluted. No, the Jews did not expect much from Samaritans. And just a chapter earlier in Luke, we read how a Samaritan village rejected Jesus and refused him hospitality. The disciples wanted to call down fire from heaven on such rudeness but Jesus would not allow it. So, when you hear Samaritan, think Jihadist, or gypsy, or pirate.

This Samaritan, however, behaved contrary to all expectation. He went right to the wounded man. He saw him and he was moved with compassion for his plight. He went to the wounded man and discovered that he was still alive. He touched him gently as he bound up his wounds, cleansing them with wine and soothing them with oil. He placed the wounded man on his own beast of burden, going all the way with him to an inn where the man could recover. He paid the innkeeper enough to keep the man fed and housed for more than a week, with the promise that he would come back to settle any debts. The Samaritan served the wounded man. He valued his life as much as his own.

In his telling of this story, Jesus gave us a clue to an underlying meaning we might miss. He dropped a huge hint. Jesus used a particular, special word that we translate as compassion. It's actually that word that means to be moved in your guts. To have your heart stirred so much that you have to do something. It's a deep down, visceral feeling of love and concern toward another person. Why does that word matter here? Because that word for heart-reaching compassion is only used in connection with Jesus. It's a rare word. And every time it's used in the New Testament, it's either about Jesus and his compassion, or about characters in stories Jesus told. In the parable of the prodigal son, that heart-reaching compassion is what the father in the story felt when he saw his son down the road coming home.

This is a word that makes us think of God's steadfast love and mercy. This deep, gut level compassion is a God-quality which Jesus had. And the Samaritan was tapping into God's deep, passionate love for the lost and broken in the world.

In fact, we can even see the Samaritan in this story as a figure of Jesus coming to save a wounded human race. Centuries ago, Augustine saw that just as a man might leave the holy city of Jerusalem, so the Son of God left the heavenly city, to take the road downward to earth. He went straight to the broken, marred race of humanity that he loves. Wounded by sin and evil, which set upon us like robbers, we languished in spiritual death. We were crushed under the spirals of destructive paths. The weak were preyed upon by the strong. The crafty took advantage of the simple. The powerful dominated the gentle. And we were, we are, a mortally wounded humanity. But in his compassion, Jesus the Good Samaritan, the man whose very parentage was questioned, came to rescue us. He brought his healing touch, even to the point of giving up his own life's blood on our behalf. And he promises to come again to make all things right.

In 2016, the Catholic Church declared a year of mercy. Around the world, churches focused on the mercy of God expressed in Jesus Christ. The logo for the Year of Mercy is gorgeous:



A man with nail prints on his hands has picked up another man and carries him on his shoulders. The two are cheek to cheek. In fact, if you look closely, you see that the Savior and the man on his shoulders share the same eye! God has drawn so close to us in Christ that he shares our very humanity. He is the Good Shepherd who carries home the lost sheep. He is the Good Samaritan who places a stricken, half-dead man on his shoulders as he lifts him off the road. He is the savior who carries the weight of the world on our behalf. His mercy endures forever.

Mercy rises from the great heart of Jesus for his lost sheep. When I can tap into the truth of this parable, then I feel moved by compassion to act in the same way. The Samaritan's actions no longer seem like those of a guy shaming me by doing the perfect thing while I miss it, piled under obligations. Rather, looking at

Jesus who has been looking lovingly at us, I am moved by the compassion he shows me.

The motivating heart of this story for me is understanding how we are all on the Jericho Road. We're all making our way through the world. The way is rocky. The road is long. There are robbers and brigands along the way. We've all been wounded. In the course of daily life, just going from Jerusalem to Jericho, we have been way laid. We have been beaten and left for dead. Maybe it was realizing we worked for scoundrels. Maybe it was an unjust termination. Maybe it was being deceived by a person we trusted. Getting left. Getting dumped. Maybe it was the leaping thief of illness, stealing our health by surprise. Maybe it's the hard road of grief. Or the grind of daily toil. The exhaustion and the tedium. The sense of being sidelined where our voice can no longer be heard. When our opinions no longer count. The thieves comes in a multitude of forms. But we are all on the Jericho Road. We make our way down a hard, rocky, dangerous path that is called life. And the truth is, we are all wounded. All half-dead. All in need of some care.

The gospel news is that one has come. He has laid aside his glory and let himself be treated as no better than a hated Samaritan. But our scorn did not turn him aside from his mission of mercy. He finds us. He sees us. He feels deep, gut-level compassion for us. He rushes to us. He tends us with the oil of his Spirit, and the blood of his redeeming cup. He carries us on his shoulders and leads us to safety. He is eternal life that begins now.

And when I think of him this way, I love him. Not out of guilt, but gratitude. I yearn to show my love to him for saving me when I was dead along the Jericho Road. And today he tells me how. Love me by loving them. Love me by going down the Jericho Road and loving the wounded you find there. Jesus has flipped the lawyer's question on its head. The right question is not "Who is my neighbor?" The right question is "Whose neighbor will I be this very day?"

And how do you know the answer? Let your compassion guide you. Which wounds break your heart? Go there. Which beaten souls tug at your soul? Go there. You can't go everywhere. But if we each started with tending the wounds which pierce us with compassion, oh what a difference it would make. Maybe it's showing discarded women and men how to tell their story, and present themselves in a way that leads them to work. Maybe it's reading with a child and waiting for the day when the child opens his heart to you. Maybe it's crossing the racial divide and walking together in prayer and fellowship down the Jericho Road together.

Maybe it's becoming a champion for the unborn or an advocate for the elderly. No one can do it all. No one has to.

But when we gaze on the mercy of the one who came to find us when we were left for dead, our hearts soften. As we worship him, he opens our eyes. He tells us, "Love me by loving them. Go to the wounds that wound your heart. Tend *those*. And watch how my mercy and love will flow through you."