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Title: Stories on the Way to the Cross: The Neighbor

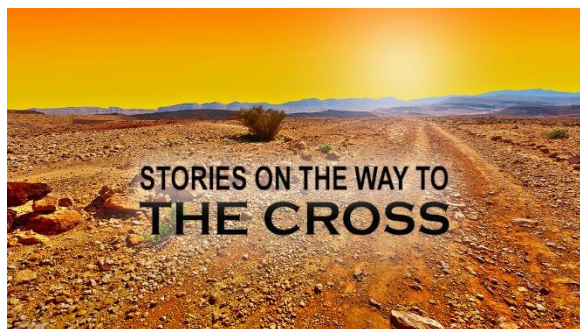
Date: March 1, 2020

Preaching: Ryan Hazen, Senior Associate Minister

Scripture: [1 Peter 3:8-12](#)

Text: [Luke 10:25-37](#)

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In case you missed it, Pastor Randy began his message on Ash Wednesday this way – “Jesus, as far as we know, never wrote a word.” That may seem odd given the fact that we pour over his words in Bible study and in church. But, so far as anyone has ever been able to determine, Jesus didn’t write anything down. He spoke. His

words got written down by others and for that we are grateful.”¹

It’s true. What he spoke was powerful. Some of what he spoke was preaching. Some was teaching. But the third way Jesus spoke is through stories – we call them parables. Many of these stories are told on his way to the cross. When Jesus announces to his disciples that he is going to Jerusalem to be crucified, he calls them to go with him. As they walk together those several days, he prepares them for what is to come. Their lives are going to be changed.

During the ten-chapter travel narrative from Galilee to Jerusalem in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus tells many of these stories. Ten of them are found exclusively in Luke. Jesus doesn’t stop teaching and preaching but those forms of communication fade into the background. Center-stage are Jesus’ short stories, his parables; they are what lead them to the cross and they will lead us in this season as well. During our Lenten journey, we will let Jesus’ stories prepare us for the cross and the empty tomb.

The first story in Luke’s travel narrative – what we’ve dubbed “The Good Samaritan” - is familiar, perhaps the most familiar of these stories. It is so familiar that it has even become part of our secular world. The hospital in Ruth’s hometown is “Good Samaritan Hospital.” We give away Good Samaritan awards for people who go beyond their duty. There is even a law in Indiana, and in many states, that protects “Good Samaritans” from legal liability for helping others in need. The phrase “Good Samaritan” has become a part of our secular vocabulary.

It happened again in our city a week ago Thursday. A semi-tanker carrying jet fuel overturned and caught fire on the ramp from I-465 to I-70. The tanker driver, Jeffery Denman, crashed on the ramp and overturned, splitting the tanker in two. That's where this WRTV6 news picks up the story.

"A nearby good Samaritan driver, Mitch Navarre, saw Denman standing next to his truck when he stopped his car and ran over to help. Navarre tried to get Denman to move away from the burning tanker, but he was in shock and unable to respond. The first of two explosions then occurred and forced the men to escape to the south side of the bridge ramp.

A second good Samaritan, Holly McNally, met the men at the end of the bridge. Denman, Navarre, and McNally got to the end of the embankment where they found Indiana State Police trooper, Chris Hanson. McNally told Hanson the jet fuel was pouring down the embankment as they escaped. Indiana State Police said a third good Samaritan also helped treat Denman's injuries until medics arrived."²

Three times in the span of two short paragraphs, this local news organization looked to today's Bible story to make their point clear and they knew that everyone would understand what they were talking about when they said "good Samaritan." But today, as we begin our journey to the cross and the tomb, let's dig a little deeper to make sure we're understanding this story correctly.

The Jerusalem to Jericho road was a tough section of road, a place you wouldn't want to be alone. But alone indeed was a man when he is attacked and left for dead in the ditch. Jesus doesn't tell us that the victim was a Jew but he almost certainly was. That is the implication of surprise when the first two that come by are Jews themselves first a priest, then a Levite, another religious leader of the time. They pass by without offering to help. And not only did they pass by, but Jesus adds the detail that they "passed by on the **other side**." These two gave a wide berth to the situation. It would have been impossible not to see the need. They made a conscious decision not to help. They saw him, but not as a neighbor, perceiving him instead to be a burden, and perhaps even a threat.

Then comes the Samaritan. Understand this clearly. Jesus was telling this story to a Jew and a predominately Jewish audience and he knew full well how they felt about Samaritans. There was bad blood between these groups – really more of a hatred – that stretched back several hundred years. Jews despised Samaritans for both ethnic and religious reasons. They would go miles out of their way to avoid contact with them. For Jews, the term "good

Samaritan" would have been laughable – the greatest oxymoron imaginable. And, of course, to be fair, Samaritans felt much the same way about Jews.

When the Samaritan sees the battered, dying Jewish man, he treated his wounds, put him on his donkey, took him to the nearest inn, nursed him through the night and made provisions to care for the man as long as needed.

For the lawyer that was testing Jesus, the point should have been painfully clear - *If even a Samaritan can act this way, certainly you who say you seek eternal life should be able to do likewise.* And a sharp lesson it is because, when asked who treated the beaten man like a neighbor, the lawyer cannot even say name the "Samaritan," but instead replies with only the words, "The one who showed mercy."

Like many stories of Jesus, he chooses an outcast to play the lead role in this short morality tale. Jesus identifies one as rejected by his audience to demonstrate God's action in the world. And all this after a group of Samaritans rejected Jesus and refused to give him a place to stay in chapter nine of Luke just as Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem. Even Jesus had reason not to make the Samaritan the hero of the story but he does anyway.

All of which makes me wonder whether there might be another lesson in this parable beyond "care for your fellow human beings." Might another lesson of this story be that God often shows up where we least expect God to be? No one expected God's glory to be revealed through the disgrace of the cross. And no one expected or even wanted, God's power to be revealed through vulnerability and suffering. But that's what happened. Perhaps that's why Jesus chose a Samaritan, to remind this self-justifying lawyer that there is no justification – no explanation for seeing as a neighbor the man in the ditch. ³

When Mitch Navarre and Holly McNally stood on the I-465 ramp bridge and found the driver standing next to his overturned tanker, nowhere in the story did I read that they started to ask him questions before they would help. They didn't ask where he was from. They didn't ask if he was a Trump supporter or a Bernie supporter. They didn't ask if he was Muslim or Christian. They didn't ask whether he was gay or straight. They didn't ask if he had an addiction of which they should be aware of. It is preposterous to even suggest that they would ask such questions but yet we are guilty of those very judgments on our neighbor each and every day.

The moment we can justify to ourselves that we no longer need to care about those around us is the moment we've thrown the key commandments

of LOVE GOD and LOVE NEIGHBOR out the window. When we fail to see God in others, we fail to see God. When we fail to see, draw near, and help those we mistrust or fear or just want to ignore, we risk missing the saving presence of God in for ourselves and our world. So who, we might ask, do we have the hardest time imagining God working through? Think of that person. And then, expect God to do just that and work in you through that person.

Jim Brothers shared with me a Civil War story this week. Even though hundreds of thousands of men were dying on the battlefields from gunfire to hand-to-hand combat with bayonets, acts of humanity and compassion were evident in the Union hospitals, where doctors set aside their differences to care for the wounded. On July 1, 1863, the first day of the three-day Battle of Gettysburg, which claimed the lives of 7,000 men in the first 24 hours, Union officers overran the Lutheran Theological Seminary, converting the church into a hospital. Although the church was officially a Union hospital, the doctors and local volunteers tended to both Union and Confederate soldiers as well as black soldiers, treating every injured man equally. The men were cared for and slept beside one another under the same roof for several days at a time. At its peak, the small church accommodated 150 wounded soldiers from both sides.⁴

But it is not simply a lesson; it is also a promise. God comes where we least expect it because God comes for all. The Union soldier and the Confederate. The self-justifying lawyer and the outcast Samaritan; the refugees and those who want to keep them out; those in need, those who help them, and those who turn away. No one is beyond the reach of God's love. No one. And so Jesus brings this home by choosing the most unlikely of characters to serve as the instrument of God's mercy and grace and exemplify Christ-like behavior. That's what God does: God chooses people no one expects and does amazing things through them. Even a Samaritan. Even our people. Even me. Even you.

You and I have good reason to understand this familiar story because we are in it. You see, we are walking down a road as perilous as the journey from Jerusalem to Jericho – it's a journey from birth to death. It is a road of exquisite beauty and adventure, but also one of great peril. So great that we cannot make the journey without being beset, from time to time, by thieves and ruffians. Their take on names like despair, loneliness, fear, lust, anger, loss. They spring on us when we least expect it and leave us in the ditch on the side of the road, half-dead.

People come by – people that we think should help – but don't. Then, the unlikeliest of persons come by – he's carrying a cross and a price is on his

head for claiming to be one with God – and he volunteers to help. We explain that we can pay but this stranger says, "no, no one can purchase what I offer but I will be glad to give it to you." And he lifts us on his donkey – a beast called "Grace." The one who helps does so without regard to who we think we are and we can't get him to be impressed by our credentials. Sometimes, however, we think we'd rather die in our lostness than humble ourselves to receive the gift he brings.

Indeed, it is good to be a good Samaritan – to care for others especially when they are different from us. But it is also helpful to imagine ourselves as the one needing care. Let me end with a poem by Kenn Storck titled "Robbed!"

Robbed!

A twisted fist'd hand, A bleeding furrowed brow.
 My eyes saw skies—dark, threatening. Cries arise through the tree boughs.
 Tossed in a ditch like garbage from a recent traveler's meal.
 I had no breath to shout again. My mind began to reel.
 In a mindless stupor, my inner eye could see
 Images of people who began to pass by me.

Out of the foggy coma a dream-like man rode by.
 A Priest with prayer shawl muttered: "Unclean! Unclean!" he sighed.
 My God! It seemed like days until my inner eye could see
 A Levi dressed in Sabbath garb hovering over me.
 His look of horror struck within my mind and heart.
 The Sabbath Law must be obeyed and so he did depart.

A twisted opened hand, a face I dare not trust,
 Thrusted hands now lifted me and we were in a rush.
 The sky was dark and gray. Hands gently salved my wounds.
 I found myself awake from sleep resting in a room.
 A twisted opened hand passed silver across the door.
 Speaking softly, left unknown: "Tell me if you need more."

I awakened from deep pain and thought it was a dream.
 Could comrades from my race have left me in such a scene?
 Samaritan – a face of hate –trash – a dirty dog!
 Salved my wounds and brought me here? My God, I'm in a fog!
 A gentle voice, the innkeeper's wife, sighed, "No, God's Word is very near.
 In those we hate and despise, God's promise is made clear."⁵

This week, in this season, as you care for others, God will do amazing things for you through the people you'd least expect. Watch for it. Let me know what you find.

¹ Randy Spleth Ash Wednesday sermon, February 26, 2020, Geist Christian Church. Can be found on the church website at www.geistchristian.org.

² Article on WRTV6 News website titled, "Tanker Driver Critically Injured After Crash and Explosion on Indy Interstate," by Daniel Bradley, Katie Cox, Nicole Griffin, and Cameron Ridle found at www.theindychannel.com

³ This take on the scripture found in an article titled, "The God We Didn't Expect," by David Lose posted on July 4, 2016, on a website called "In the Meantime" at www.davidlose.net.

⁴ Article by Adam Ramos titled, "10 Terrifying Medical Facts of the US Civil War." Item eight of this article is – "Compassion in Gettysburg." Found at <https://listverse.com/2016/06/25/10-terrifying-medical-facts-of-the-us-civil-war/>

⁵ Poem by Kenn Strock found in the "Comments Section" of Lose article cited in number 3 above.