

“Go and Do Likewise”
Deuteronomy 30:8-14
Luke 10:25-37

July 11, 2010

Who is my neighbor? In response to the question, Jesus gives not a simple answer, but tells a story. The story he tells is among the best known in all of scripture, depicted in countless paintings through the ages, and it is also a story that continues to stir the thoughts of our imaginations. Would I pass by the injured man in the road? Who might be the modern day counterparts to the priest, Levite and Samaritan?

More than thirty years ago a couple psychology professors at Princeton University decided to construct an experiment that would test one’s likelihood to help someone in need. They didn’t pick just anyone as their subjects, but instead recruited unsuspecting Princeton divinity school students. The experimenters told the students that they would have to walk over to another building and give a talk to a group of freshman divinity students. Half of the subjects were told to talk about opportunities for divinity students after graduation, and the other half were told to discuss the parable of the Good Samaritan. Another layer was added to their assignment: the students were told either that they were already late for the talk and had to hurry, that they had just enough time to get to the talk, or that they had a few extra minutes. On their way between the buildings, the students passed a man who was slumped over against a wall, apparently in need of assistance. The man was a “plant” of course, who reported back to the experimenters about each student’s response. What do you think happened? Who stopped to help? It turned out that, in this experiment, that the students who were going to talk about the Good Samaritan were *somewhat* more likely to stop and help. But the real margin of difference they found was that the people *most* likely to stop and help were the ones who were told that they had some time to spare.

When I first learned of this study several years ago, I must admit I could easily see myself as the hurried student, with five-hundred pages of assignments to read, four papers to write, running on three hours of sleep, trotting off across campus to talk to some unknown group of students. Rehearsing the lecture in my head...worrying about making a good impression...did I remember my notes?...is there anything stuck in my teeth?...uh, oh, I'm running late, better pick up the pace...hey who's that guy over there, he doesn't look so good...uhhhh...I'm sure someone will help him out...what would they think if I didn't get there on time. We might never know why the priest or the Levite didn't stop to help, but I think the researchers at Princeton may have uncovered one of our modern excuses.

Today we have desk organizers, 12-month organizers, digital organizers; we have post-its and to-do lists, school event calendars and family refrigerator calendars. We are busy people and we've got a lot of things **to do!** And inevitably the dance recital is the same night as the important school meeting, the kids' doctors appointment is on top of the conference call, and softball practice is on Sunday morning. (*Or the World Cup soccer final is during Vacation Bible School training*) How we manage our time isn't just a matter of our sanity, but our spirituality as well.

The lawyer who came to Jesus asked him, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Perhaps the lawyer was a little worried too. This man was a lawyer - not in our modern secular sense of preparing paperwork and briefs, and going to court - no, this man was a student of God's law, the law that God gave to Moses and the people Israel at Mount Sinai. And if we flip back to the Old Testament - there aren't just Ten Commandments - oh no! Keep reading there in Exodus and Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy - the final tally is *six hundred and thirteen!* So, perhaps this lawyer came to Jesus and said, "Hey, let's cut to the chase here - what do I have **to do?**" And

so we get down to the heart of the matter, “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 love your neighbor as yourself.” The lawyer quotes these words from Deuteronomy, we catch their echo in this morning’s reading,

“When you obey the Lord your God by *doing* these commandments and decrees that are written in this book of law, you turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, “Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and *do* it?” Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, “Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and *do* it?” No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to *do*.

Deut 30:10-14 NRSV, italics retranslated

At the end of June, eleven youth and six adults from our church piled on the church bus and together with Forest Hills Presbyterian Church traveled to New Hanover and Brunswick Counties in North Carolina for our Mission Trip. We were welcomed by our hosts and shown an outpouring of love and hospitality. They brought us in and told us to make ourselves at home. For the ladies of our groups, we found that to take on a whole other level of meaning, since all fourteen women spent the trip in the very home of the ministry leader and his family. Our first day, we visited the Yahweh Center, a residential facility for children in foster and adoptive care, who oftentimes suffered abuse and neglect at the hands of those called to love and care for them. We painted buildings and joined together with several children in sharing pizza and singing songs. One of them even wrote a song for us, “God sent helping angels to the people who need help. God sent helping angels to the people who have problems. Helping angels are God’s workers, oh, oh, oh.”

Our next two days we visited a small impoverished community near the South Carolina border, and worked closely with a large family struggling to work and raise children, all while living in trailers with ceilings falling in, and holes in the floor clear through to the dirt ground below. We painted

and replaced ceiling, cleaned up trash and the skilled laborers among us built a porch. But we didn't just use our hands and muscles, for some of the most memorable moments were the ones spent talking and playing with the many children that called this place home. Later as we reflected on our experiences, some folks raised the question whether there are places around Martinsville that are similar to where we worked. Yes, they decided. We went to North Carolina to answer God's call and participate in God's mission for us and for the world. And we discovered there, in a different state, a different place, neighbors in Christ. And we can't stamp our Mission Trip file, "Mission Accomplished," because the God we encountered there opened our eyes to the neighbors we have right here at home who are in need.

God's commandment – to love our neighbor, to show mercy to those in need – is not too hard or too far away! Indeed it is as close to us as our very hearts. God calls us to show mercy to our neighbors, but also to ourselves by realizing that we can't **do** everything. That in the midst of all that we are **doing**, that we might come to know God's priorities for our life. So that we may order our life with God's priorities in mind and come to know the blessings of living mercy in community with all our neighbors near and far.

Who was a neighbor to the man in need? The one who showed him mercy. Jesus said to the lawyer and says to us, "Go and do likewise." Amen.

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