

## On the Jericho Road

Luke 10:25-37

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on July 10, 2016]

### I

It happened on the Jericho Road.

It *always* happens on the Jericho Road.

The Jericho Road is the seventeen mile road that connects Jerusalem to the ancient city of Jericho.

Jerusalem is about 2,300 feet above sea level.

Jericho is almost 900 feet below sea level.

Today there is a modern highway that runs between Jerusalem and Jericho: Highway 1.

But in ancient times it was a narrow, winding road that dropped over 3,000 feet through steep and rocky terrain.

As you can imagine, it was an excellent place for thieves to ambush travelers and then escape into the surrounding hills where capture would be impossible.

For centuries the Jericho Road was known as “The Bloody Way.”

You traveled that road alone at your peril.

### II

But the Jericho Road is more than just a mark on a map.

It is also a symbol of all the sufferings in the world.

The Jericho Road is the Special Care Unit in the nursing home where the patients with Alzheimer's disease live out their days in a state of mental confusion.

The Jericho Road is Skid Row in Los Angeles where the homeless sleep in the doorways and on the heating grates.

The Jericho Road is nine members of an African American congregation at Bible study shot dead by a young man under the influence of white supremacist ideology.

The Jericho Road is death and destruction at a night club in Orlando,  
 an airport in Istanbul,  
 a restaurant in Dhaka,  
 and a historic mosque in Iraq.

The Jericho Road is Alton Sterling shot dead by police outside a convenience store in Baton Rouge,  
 Philando Castile shot dead following a traffic stop Minnesota,  
 and five police officers assassinated in Dallas.

The Jericho Road is any place where there is oppression and violence,  
 misery and fear,  
 suffering and despair,

It is any place where people are robbed of their dignity,  
 robbed of their love,  
 robbed of their freedom,  
 robbed of their very life.

Have you found yourself on the Jericho Road?

It *always* happens on the Jericho Road.

### III

*"There was a man who went down from Jerusalem to Jericho."*

So begin Jesus' most famous parable,  
 and the stage is set for what happens next.

The man was traveling this road alone and, sure enough, the thieves got him.

They robbed him...  
beat him...  
left him “half dead” on the side of the road.

A priest and a Levite,  
both of whom were holy men,  
pass right on by the dying victim.

Their actions sound callous and uncaring, but it’s not as if the priest and the Levite were simply bad people.

They had legitimate reasons for acting as they did.

Any contact with blood or a dead body would have rendered them ritually unclean according to the purity laws in the Torah.

No one who was “unclean” could enter the holy places of the Temple.

So, walking over and touching this dying or dead man,  
even just to see if he were alive,  
would have disqualified them from their religious duties.

Believe it or not, you and I are not so different from them.

Years ago a group of researchers conducted an experiment in which seminary students were each told that they had been selected to help record a talk about the Good Samaritan.

The problem was that the recording was to be done in a building all the way across campus, and because of a tight schedule they would have to hurry to get there.

On the path to the other building the researchers had planted an actor playing a sick homeless man slumped in an alley, coughing and suffering.

The excited students each hurried across campus for their important assignment, and as it turned out, almost all of them hurried past the suffering man.

One student even stepped over the man's body as he rushed across campus to teach about the parable of the Good Samaritan!

The seminary students, of course, were not bad people.

They were just human.

Like the priest and the Levite, they simply had other priorities that kept them from acting with compassion.

Knowing the right thing to do  
and actually doing the right thing  
are two completely different things.

We all value compassion.

But how many of us fail to act with compassion toward those in need when given the chance?

#### IV

That is what sets the Good Samaritan apart.

He had plenty of reasons to do as the priest and Levite did,  
passing by on the other side of the road.

He too was traveling the 'Bloody Way' and needed to get to his destination as soon as he could.

The dying man could have been a plant—  
like with the seminary students—  
used to lure the Samaritan into an ambush by his accomplices.

Any number of things could have gotten in the way of his compassion.

But for some reason, they didn't.

And so the Samaritan does the unthinkable:

He stops, putting himself at risk.

He touches the man and bandages his wounds,  
rendering himself unclean.

He puts him on his own donkey,  
slowing his journey on that treacherous road.

He takes him to an inn and cares for him,  
devoting more of his precious travel time.

He pays the innkeeper to take care of him indefinitely,  
and promises to cover any additional costs for the man's care.

Remarkably, none of these things got in the way of his compassion.

Nine years ago in New York City, a construction worker named Wesley Autrey was standing on a subway platform with his two young daughters, waiting on the train.

Suddenly another man on the platform suffered a seizure and fell down onto the subway tracks just as the train neared the platform.

With no thought for himself, Wesley jumped down onto the tracks to rescue the man by dragging him out of the way of the train.

But the train was coming too fast and there wasn't time to pull the man off the tracks.

So Wesley pressed the man into the low place between the rails and spread his own body over him to protect him as the train arrived.

The train cleared Wesley by mere inches,  
leaving only grease marks on his cap.

When the train came to a halt, Wesley called up to the frightened onlookers on the platform:

*"There are two little girls up there. Let them know their Daddy is okay."*

Immediately, Wesley Autrey became a national hero.

People were astonished by his bravery and his selflessness.

He had no real reason to help this stranger.

He didn't know the man.

He had his two young daughters with him.

What he did was a severe risk to his own life.

But a human being was in desperate need and,  
 moved with compassion,  
 Wesley Autrey did what he could to save him.

He was dubbed “The Subway Superman” and the headline in one newspaper described him in biblical terms:

“Good Samaritan Saves Man on Subway Tracks.” (*Newsday*, January 2, 2007)

The actions of Good Samaritans are so remarkable because they are so far beyond what most of us would do.

Like the priest and the Levite and the seminary students,  
 each of us would probably find ourselves passing by on the other side of the road,  
 or staring down in horror at the man who fell on the tracks.

It is simply not in our nature to forget ourselves and risk everything for a stranger.

We can't simply decide to move ourselves to compassion.

Something has to move us.

## V

And that is what I think Jesus' parable is really about.

Jesus isn't simply telling the lawyer to go and do acts of charity—  
 you know, the usual things like...  
 donate money to the United Way...  
 deliver Meals-on-Wheels one day a week...  
 or volunteer once a month at the homeless shelter.

Some people reduce the Parable of the Good Samaritan to a story about an individual doing good deeds.

On this reading, we all get gold stars.

Trophies for everyone!

Others read it as a spiritual Sunday school lesson for children that has very little to do with real life.

More often we see the story as an impossible ideal that we can't reach and therefore we are relieved of responsibility to try.

If Jesus merely wants us to go out and do as the Good Samaritan did, then we're in deep trouble.

Almost certainly, none of us can do it.

None of us can simply decide to move ourselves to that level of compassion and selflessness.

Though we may know the right thing to do in any given situation, there is no guarantee that we would actually do it.

Being a Good Samaritan takes more than a change of mind.

**It takes a change of heart.**

I wonder what brought about that change in the heart of the Good Samaritan.

After all, there were long centuries of hostility between Jews and Samaritans.

The scandalous thing about this parable is the way Jesus breaks down the barriers between Jews and the hated Samaritans.

By making the Samaritan the hero of the story, Jesus shatters long-standing cultural and religious taboos.

What made the Samaritan into a man who would risk his life for his enemy?



We can seek to put ourselves in contact with more and more people who are living in need.

We can befriend those at risk on the Jericho Road.

## VI

This has been the calling of the Church from the very beginning.

In ancient Rome, unwanted children were frequently abandoned in the wilderness, exposed to the elements so that they would die quickly.

This happened primarily with female children,  
who were not as valuable to the family as male children.

One of the earliest ministries of the church was to find these children,  
nurse them back to health,  
and raise them as their own.

When the plagues spread across Europe the church ministered to those who were dying from the diseases.

Even though people in the church died from catching those diseases,  
they would still care for those who were sick.

In the Middle Ages hospitals arose primarily from Christian churches.

Orphanages and schools for women were built around the world as Christian missionaries sought to meet the needs of the nations where they were serving.

Again and again churches had compassion on the weak,  
the needy,  
the outcast,  
and the lowly.

Where do these kinds of things come from?

I don't think they come from just trying to imitate the works of the Good Samaritan.

They come from something deeper.

They come from God.

God's compassion **for us** makes **us** compassionate.

God's love **for us** makes **us** more loving to others.

Compassion is not simply something we can imitate.

Compassion awakens within us when we see Christ himself in the face of those who suffer.

We have compassion because our hearts have been transformed by the good news:  
God came down to be with us.

God lived among us and shared our pain and our suffering.

God loves us,  
not by remaining far off in high places,  
but by being a friend to all who suffer on the Jericho Road.

Can we go and do likewise?

## VII

Remember that Jesus told this parable in response to the question of a lawyer:  
"Who is my neighbor?"

Presbyterian theologian Frederick Buechner, who turns 90 tomorrow, points out that Jesus' answer wasn't exactly what the lawyer was looking for.

He wanted a legal definition he could refer to in case the question of loving someone ever happened to come up.

He presumably wanted something on the order of:

*"A neighbor (hereinafter referred to as the party of the first part) is to be construed as meaning a person of Jewish descent whose legal residence is within a radius of no more than three statute miles from one's own legal residence unless there is another person of Jewish descent (hereinafter to be referred to as the party of the second part) living closer to the party of the*

*first part than one is oneself, in which case the party of the second part is to be construed as neighbor to the party of the first part and one is oneself relieved of all responsibility of any sort or kind whatsoever."*

Instead, Jesus makes the point that your neighbor is to be construed as meaning anyone who needs your help.

The lawyer's response is left unrecorded.

But Martin Luther King, Jr., the night before he died, summed it up this way:

"The priest and the Levite ask, 'If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?'"

But then the Good Samaritan came by, and he reversed the question:  
**'If I don't stop to help this man, what will happen to him?'"**

Amen.

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