

During the last year or two of my time in college, I moved into an efficiency apartment. It was small, old, a little run-down and small – but it was also affordable and very close to campus. I still affectionately refer to this place as “the White Shanty.” You could practically cook a meal, take a shower, and sleep all in the White Shanty by simply turning around 90 degrees. Once, when my budget was particularly tight, I even paid my rent by selling 2 student tickets to the Tennessee game. Getting \$250 for 2 \$4 tickets sounded like a sweet deal to me, especially since we ended up getting pounded by Peyton Manning and the Volunteers that year.

My address at the White Shanty might also give you some indication of what kind of place it was: it was 1000 ½-A Riverside Drive. It was a garage apartment set well behind a house on the street. Most of the time I lived in the Shanty, there were a couple of guys who lived in the house. I only remember one of them though, and that’s because he was distinctive. He had some tattoos, maybe even a few body piercings, and his head was completely clean shaven. I privately nicknamed him “Bald-headed Boy” because I didn’t know his name. I remember I envisioned him slam-dancing in the mosh pit at some bar on the Strip or even that he was part of some neo-Nazi group.

Perhaps it was because I was busy (I did work a lot of hours to get through school) or maybe it was because Bald-headed Boy’s life seemed to be packed with parties, or more realistically, it was because we were so different, I never really ever spoke to him – never really encountered him in any way. It wasn’t that we were on bad terms – me and Bald-headed Boy – but we had no relationship at all. Separated by only a small parking lot, it still seems a little odd to me now.

Anyway, let’s get to the point of this story. Early one morning, I was fast asleep in the White Shanty. I know that it was early Saturday morning, because there was a football game coming up that day. I have always been a good sleeper, and it takes quite a ruckus to wake me up. Well, there was a pounding knock on my door. I glanced at the clock at my bedside. It was 2:30. Now, I’ve always been a pretty big guy and not afraid of much, but can admit to you now that I was a little apprehensive about this. What in the world can anybody want from you between 2 or 3 AM in the morning? Was it a drunk who had stumbled upon the wrong door? Was it somebody looking for some easy money?

I quietly got up from my bed and walked over to the door. I made sure that I had my trusty Ted Williams baseball bat close-at-hand and peered right through the peephole. Standing there, right before my eyes, was Bald-headed Boy. In a fraction of a second, all kinds of thoughts whirled around in my mind. What in the world does he need? Is he going to try to kill me? Did he crash his car into my car and thought he'd add insult to injury by waking me up at 2:30 to tell me? I gathered my courage and unlocked the door.

The tattooed, pierced, Skinhead looked at me and this is pretty much what he said: "I'm really sorry for disturbing you at this time of the morning, but I just wanted to inform you that a car hit a gas line a block or two away. The line is leaking gas and the fire department is evacuating our entire neighborhood, for fear of an explosion. The law enforcement officers recently came through and told us the news, but I was afraid that they didn't know you lived back here. You might want to move to the safe area they've setup closer to University Blvd."

There's a little bit more to this story. All of the evacuees gathered at the safe area, and as I said, there was going to a football game later that day. I'm sure most of you know how big college football is in this state, and RVs from all over packed the campus. None of the evacuees were being particularly noisy. Sure, there was plenty of quiet conversation like "I can't believe we're standing out here at 2:30 in the morning" or "Hopefully, we won't be out here long because I am exhausted." Then, one of the RV people came out to greet us...

RV guy read us the riot act and soon the police showed up. The man angrily growled that "he gave a lot of money to the University" and that we were disturbing him. The policeman tried his best to reason with him on our behalf. He said, "I understand that you're upset, but don't you see, these people don't really want to be out here right now. They've been evacuated from their homes because of a gas leak. Hopefully, it will soon be resolved and they can all go back home.

This only made the man angrier. He ranted, "I don't care. They don't need to be around here. You need to do something about this." The poor policeman came to us and (apologetically) asked us if we would all mind moving across the street, just to preserve the peace. Now, the evacuees were all very frustrated at how we were treated. We knew we hadn't tried to do anybody wrong and certainly didn't set out to ruin this guy's sleep. We marveled at the irony of being somewhat permanent residents who were disturbing a person sleeping in a "house on wheels." And so, we could have argued bitterly and refused to move,

or we could have become an angry mob and turned over the RV – the thought did cross my mind – but we didn't. Everybody did exactly as the policeman asked and went across the street. After a little while, we were given the all clear sign and everybody returned to their homes – tired but safe.

Obviously, it's been a number of years now, but I have never forgotten this one night. There was no natural gas explosion. Nobody was hurt and nothing happened which could be printed in the newspaper. Yet, I have reflected on the events of this evening many times. I think of Bald-headed Boy and I can't help but laugh all the while feeling a little foolish at having pre-judged someone so poorly. That night, as I threw on some clothes and some shoes and shuffled out into the nighttime air, I thought, "Here was a person who had no reason whatsoever to do what he had done. He didn't really know me. He could have simply gone on his way as quickly as he could, protecting his own life. Instead, he took 5 minutes out of his own evacuation to help someone else." Bald-headed Boy moved away not too long after all of this happened and I hate to say, but I never ever found out his name.

Another thing I was surprised to learn is just how quickly you can go from being a resident of the land to being a stranger, a wandering alien – even in own towns. No, the evacuees weren't perfect that night, but our confrontation with the RV guy (along with how I got to be an evacuee in the first place) taught me an important life lesson and it's kind of like the lesson that Jesus teaches us today. *Who is our neighbor?*

It would be so easy to make this sermon tie into the fact that we have lots of visitors here this week. This sermon could be directed solely toward the staff serving Sawyerville. I could point out how the staff from Sawyerville comes from the Jerusalems of the world and the road to the Blackbelt might feel a little like that strange, dangerous road to Jericho. I could point out that the campers you will be serving might seem even more different than me and Bald-headed Boy. Many of you are coming from well-to-do households, with college educated parents with professional careers and you'll be dealing with children who are lucky to have clothes on their backs. But limited the Gospel to be specifically about Sawyerville Day Camp just wouldn't be doing it justice.

No, the message of Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan is preached to all of us. The people who are present only for this week, and also for those who'll be here the next. The story of the Good Samaritan is so simple, even a caveman could understand it, but we don't

like to admit it. It's easier to focus on our differences, the matters that keep us apart. It's more straightforward to make up stories in our minds about people who might be strange to us. It's safer than having your Ted Williams baseball bat close at hand. But, in the end, we're all neighbors. Every single one of us. Even RV Guy. What we do with the living our lives determines whether we are GOOD neighbors or not. No matter who you happen to be: a member of Trinity Episcopal Church in Demopolis, a Sawyerville Day Camp staffer, or someone who just happens to be visiting us on a glorious, busy day, the prescription for a Christian life is precisely what Jesus taught. Go out these doors and do likewise... go and do mercy.