

Unexpected Mercies

Luke 10:25-37

Veteran's Day, November 11, 2018

By

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

The events of the past few weeks have frankly left me a little stunned. How about you? We live in a world where violence is becoming more commonplace in our experience. This week at a bar in Thousand Oaks twelve people were shot and killed by a deranged gunman, and some of those victims were the same people who survived the mass shooting in Las Vegas a year ago! One newspaper article yesterday was entitled, “Paradise Lost”, referring to the town of Paradise, north of Sacramento, that was consumed by fire. But I can’t help but feel that somehow paradise is being lost in the face of the violence and the raging fires in our culture. Some of the victims of the fires in Ventura County and around Malibu speak of their experience as feeling like some kind of apocalypse is unfolding. And it all leaves me a bit stunned, unsure of what to do and how to feel, other than frightened and immobilized.

Following the shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Squirrel Hill, outside Pittsburgh a few weeks ago, an opinion writer commented that Mr. Rogers lived just three blocks away when he was alive.¹ She wrote, “Jews and gentiles alike ran toward the fire.” As Beth Shalom’s executive director told a reporter at the time, “I didn’t have to look — everyone came to me.” The line put me in mind of my favorite Fred Rogers’ quotes, “When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, ‘Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.’”² This was Mr. Rogers’ real-world neighborhood. Thank God Jews and Gentiles, alike, sometimes run together towards the disasters. Thankfully we see remarkable heroism and kindness in the responses to evil and human suffering.

A woman was filling out a questionnaire for her new employer. One question asked, “Who should be contacted in case of emergency?” She simply wrote down, “The nearest human being.”

1 Weiss, Bari, “A Massacre in the Heart of Mr. Rogers’s Neighborhood” *New York Times* October 27, 2018

2 <https://www.fredrogers.org/parents/special-challenges/tragic-events.php>

So I can empathize with a young lawyer, dressed for success, who steps from the crowd with a question for Jesus. He lives in a success-driven world justified by performance and achievement. "Getting ahead" is the core value of the culture in which he lives. He knows the rules and he plays by them. He's a bottom line kind of guy who wants to know the "take away" from this Jesus. He wants to know, "How do I get a life?" Jesus says, "Well, go on!" "Well," the lawyer says, "I know the rules about loving God and loving my neighbor, but I need to know one more thing." And the crowd leans in a little. "Just exactly who is my neighbor?" He wants to get the clarification right, down to the fine print. What legally constitutes a 'neighbor'? He needs something that will stand up in court.

So Jesus begins telling of a random act of violence. We don't know the name of the man who was beaten, stripped, and left for dead in the ditch. He's one of those anonymous people who we hear about on the evening news. I can imagine him saying to himself, "Why me Lord? What did I ever do to deserve this? They took everything I have, and look at the blood. If someone doesn't come soon, I could die here. Is this how my life is going to end? Beaten up, naked by the side of the road? What about my family? Who will look after them? What about my wife? She certainly doesn't deserve to become a widow! Dear God, why doesn't someone come? I'm not sure how long I can hold out. I move my lips but no sound comes out. Will anyone hear me or see me? Even if they do, will anyone care? Where is the nearest human being?"

Then by chance along comes a preacher walking down the road. "Thank God," thinks the man in the ditch. "He's going to stop and help me. He'll know what to do." But the preacher acts like he doesn't even notice. He's not stopping – he doesn't even slow down. Jesus doesn't tell us why the preacher went on. We can think up a lot of reasons, I suppose. Jesus simply tells us a second person comes down the road with the potential to make a difference. This time it's a Levite, someone who worked in the church bureaucracy. But he didn't stop either. He kept on going.

And then along comes someone else. He doesn't have on a collar but a business suit. He's stopping, thank God! Who is this guy? A Good Samaritan! That's an oxymoron. Can anything "good" come from Samaria? That's like saying "jumbo shrimp," or being told to "act naturally," or maybe you've heard of "deafening silence" or someone being

“clearly confused.” Jesus must be “clearly confused” because we all know that these racially-mixed people from Samaria are the problem, not the solution! “Good” and “Samaritan” did not go together then. But this parable itself redefined the terms and opened a completely new avenue of thinking about what it means to be a neighbor. If Jesus had only described the man who fell among thieves as the Samaritan, the parable would have left the racial and religious bigotry of the time intact. Why not use a Jew as the hero of the parable? Instead, Jesus uses the despised “half-breed” Samaritan in the story as the one to emulate. One interpreter of the parable puts it this way:

If Jesus wanted to teach love of neighbor in distress, it would have sufficed to use the standard folkloric threesome and talk of one person, a second person, and a third person (to make his point). If he wanted to do this and add in a jibe against the clerical circles in Jerusalem, it would have been quite enough to have mentioned the priest, Levite, and let the third person be a Jewish lay-person. Most importantly, if he wanted to inculcate love of one's enemies, it would have been radical enough to have a Jewish person stop and assist a wounded Samaritan . . . The whole thrust of the story demands that one say what cannot be said, what is a contradiction in terms: Good + Samaritan . . . [in this way] a world is being challenged and we are faced with polar reversal . . . [The hearers world is being] turned upside down and radically questioned in its presuppositions. The metaphorical point is that just so does the Kingdom of God break abruptly into human consciousness and demand the overturn of prior values, closed options, set judgments, and established conclusions.³

The text doesn't address the issues of violence in society or the problems that persist on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. There is no mention of the persistent problems of policing along that road, or the challenges of poverty leading to criminal activity. What we have is simply a story about mercy extended in the face of a random act of violence. It challenges our prior values, and closed options, and set judgments, and established conclusions. In this report we can see something of the essential plight of every person on earth. Other people simply pass by.

³ Crossan, John Dominic, *In Parables*, p.64-66. As quoted in Longenecker, B.W., “The Story of the Samaritan and the Inn-keeper: A Study in Character Rehabilitation”, *Biblical Interpretation* 17 (2009) pg. 422-447

Have you ever noticed that when someone gets “downsized” or fired from their job, people tend to avoid him or her, as if they have some kind of communicable disease? They don't want to catch whatever it is the other person is suffering from. It's a kind of powerful, irrational fear that is all the more powerful *because* it's irrational. And we can get a whiff of it in this report from Jesus when two people pass by a man in need. They want to avoid possible contamination.

Two sociologists were walking down that street. They see the man lying at the curb covered with cuts and bruises from a terrible mugging. One of the sociologists turns to the other and says, “Whoever did this terrible deed *really* needs our help.” We often seem confused about who the real victims are.

At the heart of Jesus' report about the Good Samaritan we catch a glimpse of the plight of all of us. This is a report of my life and your life. We're all needy people. Some of us have health needs and some money needs. All of us have needs of our souls. This isn't about stopping the car every time someone holds a sign up “Will Work for Food.” It's about you and me, and the people we work with, and the teenagers on the confirmation retreat, and the widow who is still grieving, and the man walking with the limp to church. All of us have a part that's bruised, bleeding and battered. Everyone has pain in their family life. We need more than transactional relationships to make a life. We need to reach across the divides, to care about more than ourselves and those in our family. We need to think differently about others, to define differently who our neighbors are. What we have here is not a psychologist, or a philosopher, or a sociologist. We have a knee-jerk activist who stops, and goes, and binds, and cares, and gives. He refuses to bow to the power that has beaten up this poor guy.

We expect to be the ones who are providing and caring for the world's broken and forgotten ones. We don't expect to be the recipients. Sometimes help comes from the most unexpected places and people. Sometimes our ways of organizing the world, our methods of dismissing others as of no concern of ours, needs to be challenged! Our values may need to be overturned, our set judgments and established conclusions may need a little re-working to line up with God's coming reign!

“And who is my neighbor?” asks the lawyer. The officials of the law had made obeying God so difficult that no one could understand it. But Jesus made it so simple that even a child could comprehend how to serve faithfully. So the Lord shifted the focus away from deliberation to action, shifted from the way to think about it to the way to be, the way to behave. Sometimes we are better off acting into a new way of thinking rather than thinking into a new way of acting. Jesus had the lawyer answer his own question.

True neighborliness doesn't look at boundaries in order to determine who to be kind and generous towards. True neighborliness looks for opportunities to be kind and generous towards others in need. Who is in need at your roadside this morning? What questions are in your heart today? Is the Lord inviting you to answer them? Religion that passes by on the other side is not faith. How can you and I respond to the need of those around us? Our Mission Committee will be considering that. I'll be pondering how to respond as an individual and as a church community. Maybe we can resource those churches on the frontline in Malibu through Presbyterian Disaster Assistance or the American Red Cross.

We are called to love the Lord, our God, with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind – and to love our neighbors as ourselves. And who is our neighbor? Quite simply the one who is near you – near enough for you to be able to offer assistance personally, near enough so you can help practically.

George A. Buttrick once wrote, “Half-hearted relief creates half the misery it relieves, but cannot relieve half the misery it creates.”⁴ This is the law of unintended consequences at work. When assisting others, a good question to consider is, “Whose needs are being met?” Are we simply trying to feel better about ourselves and (like the lawyer in the parable) trying to justify ourselves by our philanthropic involvements? Or do we have the welfare of others clearly in the forefront of our thinking and motives for action? It makes a difference. Who is your neighbor? The one near you whose needs you, who you can

4 https://www.azquotes.com/author/23761-George_Arthur_Buttrick

do something about, practically and personally. Don't be half-hearted. Do something to help those in need.

Ralph Hamburger was a retired Presbyterian minister who worshipped with us over the past 16 years or so. He lived at Monte Vista Grove with his wife, Mary. He died in September. His daughter, Rachel, is also a Presbyterian minister. Ralph was born in Germany in 1923, the son of a Jewish father. They left Germany in 1932 for Holland and lived in The Hague. But the Nazis came there in 1940. Ralph worked in the Dutch resistance, helping people to evade the Nazis, to hide in safe houses. He immigrated to the United States in 1948 becoming involved in the ministries of the Hollywood Presbyterian Church. From there he organized groups to travel to Germany and Austria where their help was needed with the reconstruction. Later he attended Princeton Seminary and then joined the staff of World Vision.

As his daughter Rachel was about to graduate from Princeton Seminary in 1992, he wrote to her about his decision to go to Europe with World Vision to work as a peacemaker with churches behind the Iron Curtain:

There were people there in need, people who were in a prison world, people who needed encouragement and some rays of hope. I simply ministered, using the gifts, experiences, wisdom God had granted me so far. I had no concern for myself, whether I would be recognized as a leader, or whatever have you. My passion was to love, to serve, assist and encourage the people. They might be bishops of denominations, they could just as well be doorkeepers of the House of the Lord. Both needed love and affirmation, both were important to the Lord of the Church. Really all I did (with the Lord's help) were simple acts of love and encouragement. Nothing spectacular. But consistently. Having been blest with suffering and a turbulent past, I was able to put myself in the other person's shoes and reflect on the words of our Lord, "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you.

All the while I sought to be as genuinely "in Christ" as I knew how. Sometimes in the limelight of necessity, most generally I was able to work quietly and without notice. I gloried in that because whatever I was able to accomplish was because of the Lord. He had given the gifts. He was giving the strength and resources, he had prepared the field. I was merely and gladly a channel. I was content to be just that.

On this 100th Anniversary of the Armistice that ended World War I, we listen again to the parable of the Good Samaritan. Perhaps we can learn from those who have witnessed the worst kind of devastation in the last century, and learn how to build lasting peace in this century. Show small acts of mercy and kindness. Be content to be a channel of Christ. Work quietly and without notice. Realize it all comes from Christ.

Death is not the end of the story, life is. Evil does not have the final word. What is real? Does violence and destruction have the last word in our world? Or is life let loose when we become activists ourselves? The third man stops. He cares — a free untethered expression of life, a deep unwillingness to let death have the last word. It makes all the difference how you read this reality, how you write yourself into the story of what's going on in the world. Don't be in such a hurry to walk by. You can make a world of difference. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen