

**Three Parables: II. The Parable of the Good Samaritan**

**Text: Luke 10: 25-37**

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I want to tell you three stories this morning. The first took place 62 years ago, in Pittsburgh. The second was here in Charlotte just over a year ago. The third is a story told by Jesus 1976 years ago. I have embedded the sermon within the stories, the point a trifle repetitious maybe, but I leave that up to you.

## I.

Story number one: when I was a boy in the years following World War II, my father did odd jobs for people of our church, often with little remuneration. One day he had a job cleaning wall paper - in Pittsburgh before smoke control came it was essential to do spring cleaning following each winter. He used an ancient kind of Play Doh to draw the soot off the walls. Mrs. Christman wanted to pay him more than he thought the job was worth. Meanwhile, I was along, too young to help much, but I had spied her son's bicycle standing there unused in the garage. Eddie was off to college. I guess I showered such compliments on the bike that she decided to give it to me, provided Eddie would agree, by telephone. He did. My Dad was embarrassed; but I was elated: I finally had a bike, used, but mine.

I soon began to pal around with the group of young boys on Garfield Hill who had wheels, and while I was not instantly proficient in catching up, I caught on soon enough and I began to rumble around with the best of them. We used to try to outdo each other in decorating our bikes with colored streamers and we laced the spokes of the wheels with brightly colored Cray paper.

Not long after as we came racing down the steep hill of North Pacific Avenue, and turned abruptly around the corner onto Hillcrest Street, where dust and debris always gathered, somehow the wheels of the bike slid out from under me and I went crashing down with a agonizing thud. It knocked me almost out, and scraped enough skin off my knees and elbows and shoulder that I have a faint residue of scars to this day. It was awful. It is possibly a slight exaggeration, but in my agonizing stupor, I didn't know where I was and I felt for sure that I was going to die on the spot.

My so-called friends laughed at me, looked back and rode on up the street. I remember Spider Weingartner's cackle, especially. He didn't like me. I don't know why, but come to think of it, I didn't like him either. Our neighbors on the south side of the street, all Caucasians, were sitting on their porches, but for the most part, they ignored me. One, Mr. Becker I think it was, tilted his Pittsburgh Press down a little and looked over the top of his glasses to see who was making such a racket. Mrs. Cartwright peered out from behind the screen-covered window and yelled over: "Are you alright Richie?" But, before I could answer she went back to preparing the evening meal. So there I was in need, with plenty of people around who could have helped, but no one bothered.

But I was in luck. Along came Hap Hannon, a friend of my Dad's who lived up near the school; but glory be, Hap took a quick look at me, appraised the situation, and kept walking. Billy Newmont, I think it was, (I mean it was 60 years ago) followed a few minutes later. He looked at me on the ground and said: "What are you doing down there, Rich?" And he kept on walking, too. Mrs. Hampsey came by, but you hardly expect a rotund grandmother, with her grandchild in one arm and the groceries in the other, to lean down and help a boy on the ground. She assumed somebody else would rescue me. But no one did.

I have read stories, recently and in the days of yore, where people wounded by gunshots or mugged or hit by cars lay on the ground, crying for help for hours, and no one stopped to give them aid. Ugh! Not "Ugh!" for me, the little boy of long ago, but they, the ones who died for want of some assistance, even just a phone call to the police.

After a long while: it seemed like two hours; it was probably more like 4 or 5 minutes, along came Mr. Kibby, a friend of my Dad's who worked with my Uncle Co as a Janitor at the Highland Building in East Liberty. He was African-American, "Colored" we said then. He lived just over the crest of Evaline Street, off Hillcrest, as it dropped off down the hill to Penn Avenue. God bless Mr. Kibby. He put his lunch bucket down and knelt down beside me and spoke some kindly words. Then he picked up my now twisted bike with his right hand, and lifted me onto his left shoulder and carried me all way up to my house and up the steps to our front porch, where my mother greeted us, me with grace, Mr. Kibby with gratitude. As you can see, I recovered.

But let me ask you, why do you think Mr. Kibby stopped, out of all those people? I don't know for sure, and I might embarrass him by saying this. To begin with, he was a nice kindly Christian man. But I think he stopped to help me, because he recognized what it was like to be down at the side of the road and in need of help. Oh, maybe he never fell off his bike rounding a dusty corner, but back then, he was looked down upon by almost everybody. In Pittsburgh, the cops were unfair to people of color; the poll workers were unfair; the man who ran the Green Front tavern and Bernie's Pool Hall were unfair; and the church of Jesus Christ was also unfair to minorities. It could be that knowing what it was like to be alone at the side of the road; he was more attuned to others who needed help. Maybe, maybe not.

Over the days and decades of my ministry, almost every time I had the chance to say or do something in fairness to all people of all races, of those in troubles of the body, mind and soul - even when I was so tired I just wanted to go home for dinner and skip still another meeting, which I sometimes did - but if it was a gathering regarding justice and peace, or race or the handicapped or Alzheimer's, or women's and children's rights, I grumbled for a while and felt put upon. But then I would think of Mr. Kibby and I would go and do my part.

## II.

The second story is about a great little boy in Charlotte, aged 8 then, who came home to his parents one day after school a year or so ago, and told them that he wanted to become a Jew, a Jew, an Old Testament person. Now there are far worse things that an 8 year old could choose to adhere to in our society, so in some quarters it would not seem at all bad a choice. But his family were devoted Christians, most active in their Congregation, faithful to Christ and his mission, so they were naturally puzzled as to why their son would want to depart from the faith of his family. When the wife's parents were informed, with the boy's permission thankfully, they proceeded, with Grandparental aplomb, to launch an impeccable defense of the one true faith. "Why would you ever give up Jesus?" the boy was asked. "Oh, I don't want to give up Jesus," he answered. And he didn't. Or, "If you leave the Church you will never get into heaven. Don't you want to go to heaven?" "Sure" the little fellow said.

Raising the stakes, they added: "You would have to give up Christmas and Easter." "Oh, I don't want to give up Easter and Christmas," he sallied. But I think he knew that he would inherit Hanukkah and Passover; which, my Rabbi friends tell me, are getting to be more like the festivals of consumption which plague their Christian counter-parts. And Hanukkah is 8 days long which would make for even more presents.

Finally someone got around to asking why, "Why Johnny, why do you want to be a Jew?" (By the way, I have always thought that the best way to elicit good communication from someone who is doing something unexpected is not to go on the offensive with objections and arguments; but to ask Why?)

"Why, Johnny, do you want to be a Jew?" The boy's voice grew softer. "Well, you see, I have a friend at school, named David, who is Jewish. I just thought that if I were going to be his friend, I should study what it

means to be a Jew and we could be good Jews together. Then we could learn more about each other and protect each other as friends.” And I heard an echo of the one last commandment which Jesus gave to his disciples in the Upper Room, “This Commandment I give unto you: that you love one another, as I have loved you.” And I heard another little echo of Jesus saying: “If you have done it unto one of the least of these my children, you have done it unto me.

### III.

The third and last story was told by Jesus Christ 1976 years ago. It appears only in Luke; none of the other three Gospel writers mention it. I don’t know why. It seems as though Luke gathered his own material, and since his Gospel was written after Matthew and Mark, they could not have included the story in their writings. It goes like this:

A lawyer decided to put Jesus to the test. He was trying to make him look stupid. The Lawyer in the New Testament times was not the equivalent to the lawyers you see around you today, some of which are darling and some of which are not. These learned men of old never went to court to argue a case. They delved into the minutiae of the Torah and the ever-expanding Talmud in their private studies. They dissected the two divisions of the Talmud: the Mishna, which is a vast compilation of oral law inherited through the centuries, and the Gemara, which along with the halakah, are poetic digressions and commentaries on commentaries. I could wear you out explaining the Talmud. Perhaps I already have.

Anyway, in a public forum, the lawyer asked our Lord, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” “How do I get to heaven?” Most everyone yearns to know the answer to that question. The Bible answers it, but it is not as simple or easy as some people make it. In Matthew 25 Jesus warned that: “Not all who call upon my name will enter the kingdom of heaven.” Who will then? He said, “Those who have tended to the needs of the poor, the hungry, the ill, the lonely, the least of these my brethren.” It is complicated, this subject of Christian life and eternal destiny.

How do you get to Heaven? I hope you know your answer. Life on earth is important, critical, of course; but life in heaven is forever and forever is a long, long time. The Bible answers the question; but it is not as simple or as easy as some people try to make it. The “Born Again” movement stops at: “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.” Well, that is true, but saying the words alone is not sufficient. Faith without works, the Bible says, is dead. What we believe is critical, but what we do to make that belief come to life can matter even more. A dear friend of mine in Florida always says that “Theology is what happens when the talking stops!” Some of the most sanctimonious meanderings I have ever heard come out of the mouths of those who, in the end, betray what they say by what they do.

The same question appears earlier in the Gospel: the rich young ruler asked: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus replied: “Go and sell all that you have to feed the poor.” He couldn’t do that, so the Bible adds, “He went away sorrowfully.”

Well, anyway, then the lawyer asked Jesus his question. Jesus responded with another question . . . good Socratic Method . . . “What do the Scriptures say?” i.e., the Old Testament which is the only Scripture he knew. The lawyer replied, quoting the beloved Shema from Deuteronomy 6:4-5: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Jesus said, “Good. That is correct.” But the lawyer still wasn't satisfied. You see, he still had not put this itinerant evangelist from the hick town of Nazareth in his place. He wanted to get the upper hand. So, the Bible says,

“Desiring to justify himself,” i.e. to make himself the winner, his retort was, “Who is my neighbor?” as if Jesus did not know, as if our Lord was speaking an ecclesiastical platitude and could not really define his “neighbor.” Perhaps he couldn’t. Either way, our familiar story, Parable Number II in our series, is his response. It went like this:

“There was a man traveling the road down from Jerusalem to Jericho and he fell among thieves.” Oh dear, he got mugged. “They stripped him and beat him and left him half dead.” They often did that on the Road to Jericho. We are outraged, rightfully, over the increasing crime in Charlotte and elsewhere, but it was far worse then. That Road was isolated, with its rocks and valleys and wadis (little valleys) with twists and turns that a thug could hide and pounce on a person at will. Poor man. If you have ever been robbed or mugged, or have had things stolen from your house even, you know what he felt. They left him to die at the side of the road: man’s inhumanity to man.

But the poor soul was in luck: just then a priest happened to come down the road: a minister, chosen and ordained by God to help people in need - just the right ticket. “Thank you Lord.” The priest was a specialist in things holy and good, pre-disposed and paid to love and take care of people. But, Oh dear, when the priest saw him, the man brutally wounded, half-dead, he turned his head away and crossed by on the other side, hurrying on down to Jericho. Down is right. Jerusalem is about 2700 feet above sea level, a city set on a hill. Jericho was 820 miles below sea level, a drop of 3500 feet in 17 miles: now that’s a hill!

It does not say why the priest was going down that road. It could be that Jesus chose that particular road because it was already infamous as a treacherous and dangerous route. But it could also be that, with its warm weather and lovely gardens and hot springs, the priest was going there for some R&R: good vacation spot. So while the he might have pretended he was busy, running late for some important meeting or conference down there, it sounds like maybe he was going on vacation.

Meanwhile, the half-dead man was still lying on the road. But his luck got even better, for a Levite came by. He was a Chief Officer of the temple; like the Administrative Clergyman, Sexton and Clerk of Session all rolled into one. Dr. Levite was used to people clamoring for help up at the temple. He was trained to administer the whole program of relief. He had to know how to respond to problems and keep his cool. Mister Lying-by-the-side-of-the-Road would have been sure that the Lord God Almighty was looking out for him. But, horrors, the Levite took a quick look, and he also passed by on the other side. Oh my heavens, is Jesus trying to say that church folk can be insensitive to human need, and are too involved with their “ecclesiastical agendas”?

I don’t want to be unfair, but it reminds me of the time dear old Anglican Bishop and author Colin Morris wrote that while he and some other higher-ups in the Faith were locked up in his parish house, when he was Bishop out in Zambia, putting the finishing touches on a new Ecumenical statement on the “Hidden meanings of the Eucharist,” a native Zambian had died of hunger on the steps outside the Bishop’s Residence. “Oh, I felt so dumb,” he wrote, “We had been wasting our time on Parish details, and the Africans were dying of hunger on our doorstep!”

I am not sure why the two Honorable Clergymen didn’t stop. But I can guess that they both probably regretted it when they got on down the road. Have you ever had that feeling: that you should have done something to help someone and failed to do it? And then you worried about it all the way home. Anyway, the two of them lost their chance. I hope they had a good vacation, anyway.

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Then, Jesus said, “Along came a Samaritan.” That would have scared the half-dead man to death. The Samaritans were outcasts and heretics and foreigners, largely peasant people, with a different language and culture, and religion. It is almost as if some tough-talking, armed Palestinian Muslim came walking down the streets of Tel Aviv today. You would never expect him to stop and help an Israeli, would you?

But, when the Samaritan saw him, the Bible says, “he had compassion.” What a beautiful word. It is my favorite word in all the English language. He felt for him so deeply that his own safety was unimportant. Nothing else mattered but that there was a man in need. He knew about the risk and the dangers, but he stopped and bound up the wounds with precious oil, gave him a sip of wine to help deaden the pain; he sat him on his own beast, and took him to an Inn where he gave the innkeeper a pile of money to take care of the man. “I will give you more if you need it when I come back this way.” He never expected anything, not even gratitude – just to help was enough. Thanks. Good man.

By the way when Peggy and I were touring around the Holy Land, we were driven down the Road to Jericho. It’s still desolate. Sand and rocks and Wadis (little valleys) which are dry in the summer but overflow with dangerous floods in the rainy season. We noticed some huge tents where peasant folk come and go. In fact, some little children ran out to try to stop our car asking for money, but our driver refused to stop. Curiously Shoshana, our Israeli guide, pulled over later on and stopped to show us a dilapidated old stone house, over half in ruin. She pointed to it and said, “Those are the remains of the Inn where the Samaritan took the wounded man. Would you like to take a picture?” I was incredulous. With a smile I said to her, “But my dear, that was a story which Jesus told in the Gospel of Luke; it never really happened.” She said, “Are you sure?” I said “Yes.” She smiled and revised her guided tour and chuckled, “Well, that is where it would have been if it had been real.” Touché. And on we went to Jericho, with me wondering how many other American tourists had gone home with pictures of the Samaritan’s Inn.

Did you ever wonder why the Samaritan did it, I mean why he stopped and helped? I think I know. He was a good and kindly man - that is for sure. But I think it was more that as an outcast Samaritan, he knew what it was like to be in need at the side of the road. Nobody ever helped him. He could identify with the man who was in trouble.

That is near enough the secret of the success of Alcoholics Anonymous and the other mutual help organizations. If you have ever fallen down at the side of any road, lost your job, suffered an unexpected illness, lost your wife or family and your self-respect, then you know what it means to be in the company of those who bear the mark of pain. And when you get a chance to help another, you do it. Brothers and sisters in common need. Beggars helping each other to find food.

Now, of course, there was a risk, and the Samaritan knew it. The man at the side of the road could have been a decoy. They often did that on the road to Jericho, and they do it now. One of the group would pretend to be unconscious, while his gang waited behind the rocks. The poor unsuspecting would-be helper would end up lying flat on the road himself. It was about as dangerous for him as it would be to you if you were driving along I-85 one night, and a beat-up old car loaded with tough-looking guys was pulled over to the side, and one of them came onto the highway waving his hands for you to stop.

Whatever, after he had finished the story, Jesus asked the lawyer: “Which of the three proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among thieves?” The lawyer said, “The one who showed mercy,” of course. Jesus said: “Go, and do likewise.” I wonder if he ever did.

In our time there are all kinds of people figuratively lying at the side of the road. Some are far away in Africa, dying of hunger. Or maybe it is a soldier dying on the battlefields of the world. But it could be someone in your own home: a child, a wife, a husband, a parent who is dying just to talk to you, one who needs a little tenderness, a touch of forgiveness, a pat on the back for things done well. And you sanctimonious priest or Levite, who are so wrapped up in yourself that you walk by on the other side.

There are all kinds of people in need in our American society. Sometimes it is of their own mis-doing. Other times it is forced on them. Sometimes it is accidental, for reasons of health or loss of job, or illness or anything. Sometimes it is in a name or nationality. But, they fall down hard. It does not matter how or why they got there, they need a hand to get back up. People who care usually know what it is like. They are secure within themselves. They have depended on the Lord to lift them up, time and time again. So, they can take the risk of reaching out to others. People who care have something to give; you cannot give what you do not have. They love the Lord. They listen to Jesus. They respond to human need. And they receive God's blessing.

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I close now with the identical question which we asked in Parable Number I: where do you see yourself in these stories? Maybe you are on top of the world right now. Perhaps you have everything you need and want and you can sit back in comfort and watch the world go by. But it could be that you are not. Maybe it has all caved in and you're scared of what might happen next: not so much a real live mugging, but being set upon by illness, depression, financial worries, personal troubles, family quarrels or plain ennui. Whichever, whatever, or anywhere in-between, Christ offers to see you through. He is the One who will stop by the side of the road and carry you along to the Inn or to the destination of peace within your soul. He has the keys to the kingdom and he will parcel them out as he chooses to whomever he chooses. How you get to heaven is not up to you, it is up to Jesus Christ.

So throw yourself upon his mercy, and pray a little prayer with me before we go:

*(Please repeat after me)* “Dear Lord Jesus - Draw near to me today - There is much I do not know. – But I know enough to know that I need you. – Take my life – and let it be – consecrated Lord, to Thee. – Take my moments and my days. – Let them flow in ceaseless praise. – Ever, only, all for thee. Take my life, my all – And let me hear the only words I seek to hear – To be called – Your good and faithful servant. – In Jesus’ name we pray – For now and forever more. – Amen.”