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Date: August 21, 2011
Sermon Title: Dare We Even Think About Somalia
Scripture: Acts 12:25-30
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

Acts 12:25-30

Then after completing their mission, Barnabas and Saul returned to Jerusalem and brought with them John, whose other name was Mark.

"Disaster fatigue," I hear it called. There have been so many disasters, so many calamities: floods, earthquakes, cyclones, famines, tsunamis. So many crises, so many urgent appeals, so many charities doing so much good ... only to have to do it all over again – sometimes in the same place. After a while it gets too much. People stop listening, stop caring, stop noticing, stop giving. "Donor fatigue," it's called.

I don't fault anybody for that. The news this week has been full of stories about Joplin, Missouri, reopening its schools after devastating, tragic tornadoes in May. May. That's only three months ago. And honestly, I've almost forgotten all about it. And there was another disaster in Alabama back in late spring, and if it weren't for some personal connections through our church's college students, that would have gone right by me. Japan. What was that? Earthquake? Tsunami? Nuclear disaster? All three? Two out of three? It's not easy, even among caring, compassionate, giving people. And we are caring, compassionate, giving people.

And yet, here I am, I've already shown my hand by putting "Somalia" in the sermon title. Somalia, again. Africa, again. Ethiopia, again. Famine, again. Little children dying, again. Little kids with all the signs of starvation – the big heads, the emaciated bodies, the swollen tummies, the sunken eyes – again.

We are sick of it all. Not the kids, we're not sick of the kids. We are sick of rotten governments, lousy weather and no planning, and cruel leaders, and thugs who steal donated food, and policies that make life cheap. We are sick of it and yet ... and yet ... and yet ...

The prophet Jeremiah, writing 3,000 years ago about another time, another crisis, another heartbreaking devastation, Jeremiah wrote, "Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?" Nowadays, thanks to instant news and instant communication, we actually do pass by along every crisis; every crisis really does come our way. We know it. We see it. We have to decide how deeply we feel it. And do we want to help? Can we help?

The whole idea of helping others no doubt has an interesting history. For most of the world's history, and most of the world's religions, offerings were given to God. Even in the Bible you have "thank offerings": wave offerings, grain offerings, drink offerings, all variations of the same idea. You figure out some place where you think God is, and you take your offering to that place. In organized religion, that would be some church or synagogue or temple. In Christianity we even call this place "the house of God," "the house of the Lord." It symbolizes where God is. That's why we bring our offerings here.

If you go way, way back in time, or to simpler, more basic religion, people looked around for something unusual. An unusual tree, an unusual out-cropping of rocks, an unusual mountain. Something unusual, standing out from the usual order of things. "That's where God is," people decided, and they would leave their offerings there. Or else people would decide what it was they couldn't do without. Might be a river. Or the sun. God must surely be there. So offerings were brought to the river or lifted up toward the sun.

In my life, in my travels, I've seen offerings of food, clothing, money, rice, chickens, bananas, goats, limes, placed before crosses and altars, tree trunks and boulders, idols and paintings and statues, and snake holes. Yes, snake holes. One of the kids we've helped in India has a snake hole in his tiny house, a cobra snake hole, and the cobra is one of their gods. So they have an offering at the snake hole. I suppose if I had a snake hole in my house, I'd try to stay on good terms, too. These are all ways to be good to God.

Somewhere along the line, as humanity developed and religion developed, we realized that it wasn't enough to be good to God. We needed to be good to one another, too. I bet even if you go back to Cro-Magnon, Neanderthal caveman days, even those folks figured out how to be good to others. If the folks in the cave below you got flooded out, you probably helped them pull

all their stuff outside to dry in the sun; and you probably let them sleep in your cave for a night or two; and you shared some straw and some dinosaur stew and some warmth by the fire.

But you might not have seen that as a real offering. That was an idea that reached its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Jesus made your offerings to others equal to your offerings to him when he said, "Whatever you do unto the least of these others, you do unto me." That sounds like a one-for-one theological deal. One meal for a homeless person equals one meal for Jesus. One winter coat for a poor person equals one winter coat for Jesus. One medical treatment for a sick person equals one personal gift for Jesus. One kindness to anybody, one good deed to anyone, one sacrifice for anyone equals one good deed for Jesus.

You'll be interested to know that Jesus chooses his definition of how you get into heaven by "doing unto the heart" of others, the practical, basic, or urgent thing that needs doing. To be fair, religions impose other rules for getting into heaven. Churches and pastors have other rules; even the Bible has other rules. But this is the one Jesus declares: "Do unto others (what needs doing)."

Fair enough. But for most of the world's history, that was fairly easy. Most of the "doing" you'd be in a position to do was for somebody nearby, somebody you happened to run across, somebody right in front of you. Even Jesus's Parable of the Good Samaritan imagines a chance encounter between two strangers, and one stranger helps the other stranger. But the proximity is still there. You and the persons you help occupy the same space, if only for a brief time. Suddenly, there they are, right in front of you, hurting, needy, desperate. You do something. Or you don't.

Good manners, good religion, good upbringing, common courtesy helped people to decide to help. But our Scripture lesson introduces something new: strangers helping strangers, long-distance. The Bible tells us that St. Paul and other Christian leaders were far away in Syria in a city called Antioch, when they heard about a famine down in Israel. So, the Bible says, all the Christians "each according to his ability," gave money and sent it to Israel.

Folks in a different town, a different country, a different culture, a different place, took up a collection to help total strangers from a different town and country and place who were facing a famine. Strangers helping strangers. Foreign strangers. That was revolutionary. People, in the name of God, in

the service of God, helping people they didn't know, far away. This is probably the first relief offering in history, the first mission offering in history.

Two thousand years later, that's second nature to us at Greenfield Hill Church. Truth is, we give all year long for every cause under heaven. I could give it to you by category or location or alphabetically. Let's try it:

A for Appalachia

B for Bridgeport

C for cancer

D for drug rehab

E for emergency help

F for F.O.C.I.

G for St. George's Soup Kitchen

H for Habitat

I for India

J ... I bet you think I can't come up with something for J. How about Jerusalem!

K for kids

L for lepers

M for meals

N for nurses

O for orphanages

P for prisons

Q for quilts (we've sent a couple hundred quilts for poor kids in India)

R for rescue mission

S for schools and surgeries

T for teachers and tanning salons (just checking to see if you're still listening)

Well, you get the picture. If it needs doing, one way or another, someone in this church, somehow, is doing it. Which brings us to Somalia. If we dare, if we're not too tired, too jaded, too spent.

My whole world turned upside down in 1974. I read an article in *The New York Times* that said that millions of people were starving to death in Africa and nobody cared. That shattered my safe, sweet, easy, little world; totally uprooted my ministry, my thinking, my giving, my reading, my preaching and teaching, and even vacations and travel, and free time and hobbies. (Hodes, Jeffrey L. "West Africa: Neither Rain Nor Fast Relief." *The New York Times* 9 Jan. 1974. Print.)

Whether you like me or don't like me, whether you like the direction of our church or don't like the direction of our church, it is all traceable to this article written 37 years ago. Exact same place. Exact same problem. Africa. Famine. So I know. It is tiring. It is infuriating. It is depressing. And we who call ourselves by the name of Jesus Christ, we can't afford the luxury of being tired, infuriated, depressed.

I've noticed something recently, the last year or two, especially on college campuses, I've noticed more people identifying with their identity. In other words, they decide who they are at their core, and then they just lay it out for all to see. In particular, I see more Muslims wearing skullcaps, and hijabs (women's head coverings), and more Jews wearing yarmulkes. It's a way of saying to those who know you and those who don't know you, "This is part of who I am. This is important to me. It is important for me that you can look at me and know what I stand for."

What can we do as Christians? We are not compelled as Christians to wear any certain clothing, to dress one way or another. Wearing a cross around our necks has become so trendy and fashionable that it has lost its power as a statement. Christians have tried T-shirts and bumper stickers. One bumper sticker promised, "Read the Bible. It'll scare the hell out of you," and T-shirts were often a takeoff on pop culture. Instead of "Things go better with Coke," it would be "Things go better with Jesus." Or, instead of "Gold's Gym," it would be "God's Gym."

Years ago, Tiffany's sold diamond lapel pins that said "Try God." Some said "Try Jesus." The idea was for people to wear them to work or on the subway or out shopping, helping to spark conversation. There's nothing wrong with any of that. There's nothing wrong with being proud of who you are. There's nothing wrong with helping others know what's important to you. It's just that for us, for Christians, what we are to be known for is best shown by what we do, not what we say or what we wear.

Christianity has only one distinctive feature. Love. We are to love. We are to be loving. We are to "love in word and deed." Other religions have Law and reincarnation and detachment and prohibition and fatwās and fasts and punishments. We've got love. Love God, love your neighbor, love your enemy, love others, love yourself.

What's this got to do with Somalia? In just a minute, we will end our worship by singing a boring hymn. Boring, monotonous, which means "Mono-tone-ous." And it is. But it has wonderful words:

*We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord ...
We will work with each other, we will work side by side ...
We will walk with each other, we will walk hand in hand ...*

And the chorus repeats:

*And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love,
They will know we are Christians by our love.*

That's why we dare to even talk about Somalia. They need our love, and love is what we do best. It makes us distinctive, it's our calling card, it's our nature, our essence ... and our God.

On Friday we took Brigitta to college for her sophomore year at Bryn Mawr. She's playing field hockey again this year, and there was a welcome lunch for all the athletes and parents. We ended up sitting with the coach, who was proudly wearing her Bryn Mawr field hockey T-shirt. I was struck by the slogan on the back of the T-shirt, her motivation motto for the year. It said, "What you are is what you have been. What you will be is what you do now." *What you will be is what you do now. Today we choose to "do" Somalia. We choose to care. We choose to love. And in so doing, we choose to live our Christian faith.*

What we will be is what we do now.