



Date: October 16, 2016
Sermon Title: Our Good Samaritans
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Luke 10:25'37

Luke 10:25-37

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he said, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' He said to him, 'What is written in the law? What do you read there?' He answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.' And he said to him, 'You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.'

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?' Jesus replied, 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend." Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'

Here's how I began being a pastor: in June of 1968, I graduated from college, and the next week five Churches in Brooklyn hired me to start a youth ministry, to take the kids of Flatbush off the streets during a particularly hot time in American history. I started with nothing and nobody. I started a coffeehouse ministry for teenagers, a Vacation Bible School, a day camp, Bible Study, and I preached. That September I started seminary, and the first thing they had was a job fair, where all these Boston area Churches came to hire kids like me to do Church work. Believe me when I tell you I knew nothing. *Nothing*.

Overnight, I'm running youth groups, teaching Confirmation classes, starting a drop-in center, and beginning another coffeehouse ministry. My immersion into ministry really was a "baptism by fire." I was "tossed to the wolves." In short order, I was a pastor, a preacher, a teacher. I was battling organized crime, getting beaten up, dealing with drugs, guns, and runaways, and doing counseling—all that at the age of 21 with about two weeks of seminary under my belt. Sometimes we have to learn by doing.

As you know, our Bible Study this fall has been on what the Bible teaches about leadership—some fascinating lessons in there. Most of the Bible's best leaders were humble and reluctant, but once they got to it, they were bullish, determined, forceful. That was true of the biggies: Abraham, Moses, Paul, the Prophets; Solomon, Mary, Deborah. They were all quite shocked to be made leaders, but once they committed to do it, it was full-speed ahead.

Last week we turned to Jesus as a leader, and this week we looked at how he trained his disciples. Frankly, his method was the "David Rowe School of Leadership": Toss them overboard and see if they can swim. In Matthew, Chapter 10, we see that Jesus gathered his 12 disciples together, gave them a pat on the back, sent them off two by two into the rural towns in Israel. He told them to preach, to heal the sick, to raise the dead, to cleanse the lepers. And not to worry about anything.

So much for training! I guess we could say that they had been watching Jesus in action for a year or so; and it's true, I had the advantage of growing up watching my father in action. But watching is a whole lot different from doing.

What got me thinking about this was my last Sunday's sermon, where I delved a bit into "faith and politics." I explained why I believe in the separation of Church and state, which is why we don't tell you how to vote. Instead, we try to make faith real and relevant, something that is intrinsically part of us, so we take it with us out into the world. When we are at our best, what happens in here shapes what we do out there. We lead by

example, we *all* lead by example. You watch me and Alida, we watch you. We watch one another. We see what matters. We learn what to do. This is our "training," right here.

We are a Church that feeds the hungry, settles a refugee family, treasures children, loves doing weddings, affirms teenagers, cares for the elderly, looks out for the neighbor, the stranger, the lost. That's who we are, what we talk about in here; we teach it, preach it, sing it. And we take that onto the commuter train on Monday, into the voting booths, onto the playing field, and into the classroom. We take that to work, to the family dinner table, to hot-topic discussions with friends. Who we are out there, how we live out there is not alien to what we think about in here.

Today I'm going to tell you four stories from our Church family, folks who sit near you in the pews; your friends, your neighbors, folks who found it in their hearts to "love their neighbors" in surprising ways: Joanna Patterson, Aun and Suranya Singapore, Ann and Dave Harvey, Brenda and Jeff Steele. They are heroes of our faith in daily life, in quiet, unassuming and surprising ways.

One family had some new neighbors. Recently, a group of men moved into a cottage nearby, not your typical Greenfield Hill family. Generally we are fine people who went to fine colleges and have fine jobs. These guys went to the "school of hardest knocks," the battlefields of Afghanistan and Iraq. They had already lost one friend to the weariness of war in the alarming epidemic of soldier suicide. They were about to lose another, just last Sunday. Our Church friends entered into their world, neighbor to neighbor: homemade muffins, a friendly voice, trying to be the living embodiment of the Good News to some guys who don't hear much good news.

We never know what we will find when we open our front door, turn left or right, open our eyes, walk around, see what's about. For another family, indeed their whole family and a circle of friends, for them it was a young boy. Alone. Bruised by a harsh life. Abandoned by the very basics we all take for granted, like hope, home, love. It's not easy to open your heart to a heart that you know is already broken, to a spirit already crushed. And yet, this family did what I know many of our Church families have done when they dared to open up their front door, amazed at what is waiting outside, waiting for someone, something, somehow, some day. And suddenly it's these Church families, our friends, saying, "Well, I guess this is that 'some day,' we are the some ones who have to do something, somehow."

Bob Dylan just won the Nobel Prize for Literature, something I agree with. He has spent a lifetime challenging us to be better than we often settle for. In one song, "Dear Landlord," he stated,

*Each of us has his own special gift,
And you know this was meant to be true.
And if you won't underestimate me,
I won't underestimate you.*

That's sort of the art of being a Christian, not to underestimate the humanity of someone else and not to underestimate our own power to change the world . . . one person at a time.

If the Nobel Prize for Literature had been given 2,000 years ago, I think Jesus would have won. Our Scripture lesson today, the Parable of the Good Samaritan, along with another, the Prodigal Son, have been called the two greatest short stories ever written. And I agree. In today's story, the Good Samaritan is just like all of us. He gets up one day, goes out his front door, no idea what awaits him. Could be another routine day. Go to work. Trudge around. Make a sale. Pocket some money. Go home. Live for another day. A Willy Loman day.

Or, he could find a person lying in the road, his life force beaten out of him by the evils of the day, a victim of heartless, cynical, vulgar brutality. Government failed him. Society failed him. Religion passed him by. Literally. All of a sudden, there are the Samaritan and the victim, together in the road. They're side by side, nobody's watching. Nobody would know. The Samaritan could have turned his back or walked on by. After all, to do something is a big risk. Getting involved, emotional attachment, time lost, resources used up. What if he's a fake? What if it's a scam? What if he's ungrateful? Or a danger? The Bible tells us the Good Samaritan stops, washes his wounds, picks him up, puts him on his donkey, carries him to safety, and pays for his care.

By the way, I should mention *why* Jesus told this story. A man asked, "How do I get to heaven?" And he asked, "Who is my neighbor?" To Jesus the questions are linked. How you get to heaven and whom you think of as a neighbor go hand in hand. Then Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan, the one person who takes the time to stop, to notice, to care. And to do the right thing. Not like the people who were too busy, too holy, didn't want to get their hands dirty, didn't want to get involved, didn't want to waste their time. And when the story is over, Jesus asks, "Who is the real neighbor here? Who has the doors of heaven wide open?"

Our third Church family literally found their neighbor on their doorstep. A teenage girl from next door came to them, distraught. She couldn't wake her father. When you're 15 or 16, death doesn't seem possible. It's not a reality, it's so remote. So our third family went with the girl to her house. The man went upstairs to the dad, the woman stayed with the girl; the ambulance and medics came and were very professional, doing their best, but it was too late. But it was our friends who surrounded the young girl, who shared the saddest news, who loved unconditionally, who truly, truly were neighbors.

This is how it goes sometimes. We don't know what the day will bring. We don't know what the neighbor will need. We don't know who will come knocking on the doors of our heart, who will cross the threshold of our lives, who will need the comfort of your embrace. We don't know.

One morning, the mom from our fourth family went for walk in her neighborhood. She saw a young woman. Something wasn't right. She could sense that there was a need, a hurt there. Undefined. Unclear. With a hospital bracelet on her wrist, maybe she was a runaway, maybe a walkaway, maybe just alone. It was the kind of situation easy to ignore; some might say best to ignore it. Early morning. A stranger. Something out of place. Maybe call the police. Maybe turn away. Maybe convince yourself it's none of your business. Our Church member invited the young woman into her house, let her take a shower, gave her clothes and some breakfast, and called Alida. Together, they befriended someone who felt a long way from friendship. They comforted her, gained her trust, reunited her with her mother.

Four stories from our little country Church. No big deals. No headlines. No earthshaking transformation of the universe. Russia and America aren't smiling. Israel and Palestine aren't talking. Trump and Clinton aren't planning a post-election vacation together. But the gates of heaven have opened wider. God is smiling, and so are we.

When I asked these dear friends if I could tell their stories, they were all quite amazed; none of them felt they were especially worthy of note. Indeed, their comments afterward are so, so beautiful. "I wish I could do more of that each day." "We just did what we could." "I felt as though I was being my true self for those few hours." "We talk with our kids about loving our neighbors as ourselves, and sometimes that's hard. It's hard to face your fears, your prejudices, to reach out." "I will never forget their gratitude." "I wanted to show some love, and all I got back was love. And we all learned something too." "We don't feel as though we did anything special other than give some love to someone in need."

Wow! Do you know how much theology is in those words? How much basic Christianity? How much basic ethics, basic humanity, basic "divine spark" in those words? How many answers to America's issues?

"We did what we could." "We gave some love to someone in need." "And all we got back was love." "And we learned something too." "I wish I could do more of that each day." "I felt as though I was being my true self for those few hours."

And guess what! They did all that without going to seminary. Just like the disciples when Jesus sent them out, just like the Good Samaritan on the road long ago, our four Church families simply lived our simple faith in the simplest ways possible. Our goal in being in here is to be like that out there.

Let's stand and sing our final hymn, No. 612, "O Jesus, I Have Promised."

*O Jesus, I have promised to serve Thee to the end;
Be Thou forever near me, my Master and my Friend;
I shall not fear the battle if Thou art by my side,
Nor wander from the pathway if Thou wilt be my Guide.*

*Oh, let me hear Thee speaking in accents clear and still,
I dare not trust my judgment: Thy way shall be my will;
Oh, speak to reassure me, to hasten or control;
Oh, speak, and help me listen, Thou Guardian of my soul.*

*O Jesus, Thou hast promised to all who follow Thee
That where Thou art in glory there shall Thy servant be;
And Jesus, I have promised to serve Thee to the end—
Oh, give me grace to follow, my Master and my Friend.*

*Oh, let me see Thy footprints, and in them plant mine own;
My hope to follow duly is in Thy strength alone;
Oh, guide me, call me, draw me, uphold me to the end;
And then in Heav'n receive me, my Savior and my Friend.*