

“Dangerous Journey”
Luke 10:25-37, Amos 7:7-17
July 10, 2016
The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings

Is there anywhere that you drive where you make sure your car doors are locked? I remember the first time Erin and I went to a White Sox baseball game at old Comiskey Park on the south side of Chicago. I made sure my doors were locked. Maybe it's something about old ball parks, but I felt the same way going to Yankee Stadium, driving through the south Bronx was like driving through a war zone. And, in a way it was a war zone. Many of you remember driving to old Tiger Stadium on Michigan Avenue in Detroit. Doors locked, right? That's the way many of the people in Jesus' time must have felt about the journey from Jerusalem to Jericho. Today that is only a journey of about 20 miles and you can drive it in a little more than half an hour. But everyone always said that one went from Jerusalem down to Jericho. Jerusalem, perched in the Judean hills is about 2500 feet above sea level while Jericho, near the Dead Sea, is one of the lowest cities on earth at 825 feet below sea level. In those twenty miles, one would travel down 3300 feet along a winding treacherous road that was for centuries, a traditional home for robbers and outlaws. It was a dangerous journey. If they could have locked their doors, they would have. They've been down that road, and they've been careful when they had to go that way. So when Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan, it is a story they can relate to.

I believe that I've mentioned before that one of my favorite movies from the '90s is “Grand Canyon.” A scene that continues to haunt me happens early in the movie, when the character played by Kevin Kline has his car break down one night in a dangerous area of Los Angeles. As he is waiting for the tow truck to show up he begins to be accosted to some local gang members. But then the tow truck shows up, driven by Danny Glover, who after hooking the car up to his truck has a conversation with the gun toting gang leader. In that talk, he says, “The world's not supposed to work like this. Maybe you don't know that yet. But this ain't the way it's supposed to be. Everything is supposed to be different than what it is.” We know that, don't we? Everything is supposed to be different from what it is. We've seen

that this week. We see trouble in the world, in Syria, in Iraq, Istanbul, in Bangladesh; in our own country this has been a terrible few weeks: for young people in Orlando, for police officers in Dallas, for far too many places where young men die violently, so many of them black. Things are supposed to be different. There shouldn't be all these dangerous places, dangerous journeys. How do we fix this? Too much violence, too many guns in the hands of the wrong people, what do we do? What do you and I do? Maybe what we need is more Good Samaritans. Is that why Jesus tells the story? Is that what we need, more people like the Good Samaritan?

What does it mean to be a Good Samaritan? What do you think of when you hear that term? We hear it in our culture as a place for healing, like Good Samaritan Hospital. We have Good Samaritan laws on our books in many states, protecting those who try to help someone in need. A Good Samaritan is one who helps someone who is in need, someone who is hurt or in trouble. When Jesus tells the lawyer to "Go and do likewise," he means that we are supposed to help those in need. That's the common understanding in the world today. A Good Samaritan is one who helps someone. And that's true, and I don't want us to lose perspective about that. We should help those in need. But that's just the first level of what this parable is about, and we lose the intent of the parable if we leave it there. We lose the point of the story if we forget that Jesus makes the hero of the story a Samaritan. Jesus was a Jew and so were all the people listening to him that day. And traditionally Jews and Samaritans did not get along. They were more than enemies. Jews wouldn't normally go into a Samaritan town, they would go out of their way to go into the area of Samaria, if they had contact with a Samaritan they would consider themselves unclean. So the question this brings up to the modern listener, is this: is there someone, if you saw them lying wounded by the side of the road, you would not stop to help? Is there someone that because of their skin color, their religion, their ethnicity, their sexual orientation, their politics, anything about them that would keep you from stopping to help? In the story that Jesus tells, there is a priest and a Levite, religious leaders who do not stop to help the man who is hurt and lying in

a ditch. And let's be honest, maybe there are good reasons for them to pass on by. It's been pointed out by many that the priest and the Levite may have had duties in the Temple or the synagogue and if they had contact with any blood from another person they would be ritually unclean and unable to perform their duties for the people. What's more important? Taking care of one man, or taking care of the many who are depending on them? And look, who knows if those robbers are still in the area. Maybe the priest thinks, "If I stop and help, I could get attacked as well." Or perhaps the Levite says to himself, "Besides, this is a well-traveled road, surely someone else will be by soon to help this guy, right?"

Many of you have seen footage of a sermon given by Martin Luther King, Jr. on April 3, 1968 in Memphis the evening before he was killed. That is his famous "I've been to the Mountaintop," sermon. But what you might not remember is that before that famous conclusion to his sermon, Dr. King was giving a sermon on the Good Samaritan. In that sermon, he points out that when the priest and the Levite are passing by the man in the ditch, the thought that is on their mind is probably, "If I stop to help him, what will happen to me?" Is that the question that we ask? If I stop to help him, am I putting myself in danger? If I stop to give money to that homeless guy, will I be disappointed in what he does with it? If I stop to help will it take too much of my time? If we sponsor a refugee family from Africa or the Middle East will we be letting in a terrorist? If I stop to help, what will happen to me? There's all kinds of reasons not to help. There were all kinds of reasons that the Samaritan shouldn't have helped. The other man was a Jew, it was the Jews responsibility to take care of their own. It would expose him to the same danger from the robbers. It was going to cost him time and money, at least two days wages to pay someone to take care of him. Do you have hundreds of dollars to drop into the hands of someone that you do not know? What will happen to me if I stop to help? But the question, according to Dr. King, should be, "What will happen to him, if I don't stop?" Compassion begins when we have our eyes off ourselves and we begin to think about another. What will happen if we don't

help? It doesn't matter that the man is a Jew. Should it matter to us if the person in need is a Muslim, or a Jew or a Hindu or a liberal or a redneck or a racist or gay or straight or trans-gender or Asian or black or white? The question is not who is he and is he deserving of our help, but who are we and who are we called to be as disciples of Jesus Christ—and we are called to ask, “What will happen to him, if I don't stop?”

That's the second level of understanding of this parable. The first level says that we should show mercy to those in need. But the second, deeper level says that we should show mercy to *everyone* in need, no matter who they are, no matter if it is a risk to us or not. But there's a third level I think of this parable as well. Because we need to see ourselves as part of the story. Normally we read this story and we think to ourselves that yes, there are many times when I've been the priest or the Levite and passed by someone in need. And we also see ourselves as the Samaritan who can care for someone who is hurt even when that person might not care for us. But when Jesus told the story, remember that he is speaking to Jewish people who knew that dangerous journey. They could see themselves as the man who was attacked. Can we? Can we see ourselves as the guy in the ditch? What if we were the one in need? Do we let someone show compassion to us? Do we let *anyone* show compassion to us? Is there someone, if we were the one lying in the ditch, we would rather bleed to death than to have them touch us? If we truly want a more compassionate society, would we let ourselves be the recipients of compassion? From anyone? What does it take for us to become compassionate?

Robert Wuthnow, a professor at Princeton University, once conducted some research about why some people are generous and compassionate, while others are not. He found out that for many compassionate people something had happened to them. Someone had acted with compassion toward them, and this experience had transformed their lives. For example, Wuthnow tells the story of Jack Casey, a rescue squad worker, who had little reason to be a Good Samaritan. Casey was raised in a tough home, the child of an alcoholic father. He once said, "All my father ever taught me is that I didn't

want to grow up to be like him."

But something happened to Jack when he was a child that changed his life, changed his heart. He was having surgery one day, and he was frightened. He remembers the surgical nurse standing there and compassionately reassuring him. "Don't worry," she said to Jack. "I'll be here right beside you no matter what happens." And when Jack woke up again, she was true to her word and still there.

Years later, Jack Casey, now a paramedic, was sent to the scene of a highway accident. A man was pinned upside down in his pickup truck, and as Jack was trying to get him out of the wreckage, gasoline was dripping down on both of them. The rescuers were using power tools to cut the metal, so one spark could have caused everything to go up in flames. The driver was frightened, crying out how scared he was of dying. Jack remembered what had happened to him long ago on the operating table, how that nurse had spoken tenderly to him and stayed with him, and he said and did the same thing for the truck driver, "Look, don't worry," he said, "I'm right here with you, I'm not going anywhere." When I said that, Jack remembered later, I was reminded of how that nurse had said the same thing and she never left me. Days later, the rescued truck driver said to Jack, "You know, you were an idiot, the thing could have exploded and we'd both have been burned up!"

"I just couldn't leave you," Jack said.¹

So what can we do, you and I? We can realize that we as Christians have been on the receiving end of God's mercy. And because of that the answer to the lawyer's question is simple. Who is my neighbor? Everyone is your neighbor.

Yesterday in the NY Times, the columnist Charles Blow wrote: "The moment any person comes to accept as justifiable an act of violence upon another—whether physical, spiritual, or otherwise—that person has already lost the moral battle . . . When we all can see clearly that the ultimate goal is harmony and not hate, rectification and not retribution, we have a chance to see our way forward. But

¹ Wuthnow, Robert. Quoted by Thomas Long in "Meeting the Good Samaritan" sermon, July 15, 2007.

we all need to start here and now, by doing this simple thing: Seeing every person as fully human, deserving every day to make it home to the people he loves.”²

There is no better example for us live by than Jesus Christ, who loved us at the cost of his life. Let’s at least try to follow his admonition at the end of the story of the Good Samaritan: Go and do likewise.

merciful? Then in your heart you will know what this means: Go and do likewise. For anyone.

2 Blow, Charles, *A Week From Hell*. New York Times Op-Ed. July 8, 2016